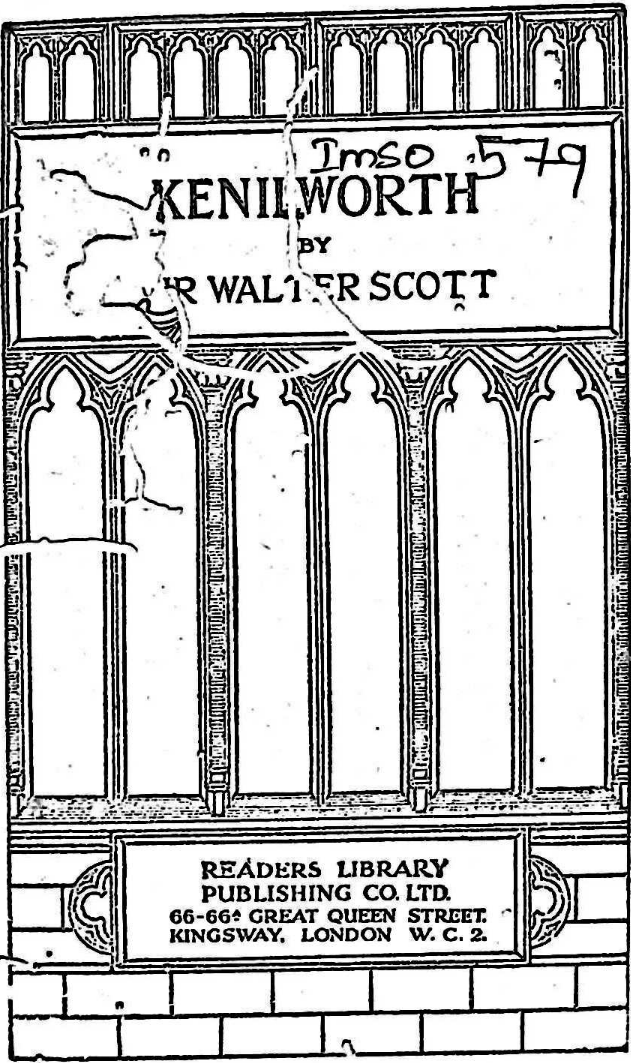

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KENILWORTH

BY

SIR WALTER SCOTT

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EDITOR'S NOTE

Kenilworth, as with many another historical romance, is not without certain foundations in fact. Scott himself tells us that he was indebted to Ashmole's *Antiquities of Berkshire* and earlier authorities for several names and incidents; though he goes on to say that his first acquaintance with the history of the unhappy Amy Robsart, the heroine of the story, was made through the medium of a ballad called "Cumnor Hall." This ballad, by a poet named Mickle, describes the tragedy of the Earl of Leicester's unfortunate Countess, and seems to have fixed strongly upon the youthful Scott's imagination; an attraction referred to by his old schoolfellow, Irving, who says: "After the labours of the day were over we often walked in the Meadows (a public park in Edinburgh, intersected by formal rows of old trees), especially in the moonlight nights, and Scott seemed never weary of repeating the first stanza:

The dews of summer night did fall;
The moon, sweet regent of the sky,
Silver'd the walls of Cumnor Hall,
And many an oak that grew thereby.

Lockhart, again, Scott's biographer, tells of his being so affected by it that "he wished to call his novel, like the ballad, *Cumnor Hall*, but, in deference to his publisher's wishes, substituted the present title."

The licence of the novelist was used in detailing the circumstances of the Countess's murder; and, indeed, it does not appear to be known how either she or the Earl actually met their ends. Scott's version is a variation of Ashmole's account to the effect that Amy's murderers, Varney and Foster, "whether first stifling her or else strangling her, afterwards flung her down a pair of stairs and broke her neck, using much violence upon her"; an account to some extent confirmed by a play of the time, "The Yorkshire Tragedy" (erroneously attributed to Shakespeare), in which, with a description of the crime, occur the lines:

The only way to charm a woman's tongue
Is, break her neck—a politician did it.

Other accounts speak of her having been poisoned, and Ashmole, again, refers to a legend current in the village of Cumnor that she suffered the fate of Desdemona, being stifled in her bed.

EDITOR'S NOTE

How far Leicester was privy to the crime is another matter in dispute. "It is possible," says Scott, "that slander, which very seldom favours the memories of persons in exalted stations, may have blackened the character of Leicester with darker shades than really belonged to it. But the almost general voice of the times attached the most foul suspicions to the death of the unfortunate Countess, more especially as it took place so very opportunely for the indulgence of her lover's ambition"—his ambition being, of course, to marry the great Queen Elizabeth, who was unaware of his secret marriage and known to have indulged tender feelings towards him. "There was too much ground," Scott concludes, "for the traditions which charge Leicester with the murder of his wife." Nevertheless, he elsewhere explains why he found it necessary to depict the Earl as being rather the dupe of villains than wholly responsible for their atrocities. "He would," he says, "have made a character too disgustingly wicked to be useful for the purposes of fiction."

As to the manner of Leicester's own end, already referred to as doubtful, we have the hint towards the conclusion of the novel itself: "There was something retributive in his death, if, according to an account very generally received, it took place from his swallowing a draught of poison which was designed by him for another person." This more or less well-founded explanation was doubtless suggested by a reading of Ben Jonson's report of the matter to Drummond of Hawthornden: "The Earl of Leicester gave a bottle of liquor to his Lady (a second wife) which he willed her to use in any faintness; which she, after his return from court, not knowing it was poison, gave him, and so he died."

From these somewhat obscure data, compounded of legend, tradition, and true history, Scott built the romance which for more than a century now has been a favourite with readers of the Waverley series of novels. "*Kenilworth*," says Lockhart, "was one of the most successful of them all at the time of publication; and it continues, and, I doubt not, will ever continue, to be placed in the very highest rank of prose fiction. The rich variety of character and scenery and incident in this novel has never indeed been surpassed; nor, with the one exception of *The Bride of Lammermoor*, has Scott bequeathed us a deeper and more affecting tragedy than that of Amy Robsart." Comment on which piece of criticism would be superfluous. Its soundness has been amply confirmed by time.

THE EDITOR.

A. C. Pillay
1/7/27

Kenilworth

I

It is the privilege of tale-tellers to open their story in an inn, the free rendezvous of all travellers, and where the humour of each displays itself, without ceremony or restraint. This is especially suitable when the scene is laid during the old days of merry England, when the guests were in some sort not merely the inmates, but the messmates and temporary companions of mine host, who was usually a personage of privileged freedom, comely presence, and good humour. Patronised by him, the characters of the company were placed in ready contrast; and they seldom failed, during the emptying of a six-hooped pot, to throw off reserve, and present themselves to each other, and to their landlord, with the freedom of old acquaintance.

The village of Cumnor, within three or four miles of Oxford, boasted, during the eighteenth year of Queen Elizabeth, an excellent inn of the old stamp, conducted, or rather ruled, by Giles Gosling, a man of a goodly person, and of somewhat round belly; fifty years of age and upwards, moderate in his reckonings, prompt in his payments, having a cellar of sound liquor, a ready wit, and a pretty daughter. Since the days of old Harry Baillie of the Tabbard in Southwark, no one had excelled Giles Gosling in the power of pleasing his guests of every description; and so great was his fame, that to have been in Cumnor, without wetting a cup at the bonny Black Bear, would have been to avouch one's-self utterly indifferent to reputation as a traveller. A country fellow might as well return from London, without looking in the face of majesty. The men of Cumnor were proud of their host, and their host was proud of his house, his liquor, his daughter, and himself.

It was in the courtyard of the inn which called this honest fellow landlord, that a traveller alighted in the close of the evening, gave his horse, which seemed to have made a long journey, to the hostler, and made some inquiry, which produced the following dialogue betwixt the myrmidons of the bonny Black Bear.

"What, ho! John Tapster."

"At hand, Will Hostler," replied the man of the spigot, showing himself in his costume of loose jacket, linen breeches, and green apron, half within and half without a door, which appeared to descend to an outer cellar.

"Here is a gentleman asks if you draw good ale," continued the hostler.

"Beshrew my heart else," answered the tapster, "since there are but four miles betwixt us and Oxford.—Marry, if my ale did not convince the heads of the scholars, they would soon convince my pate with the pewter flagon."

"Call you that Oxford logic?" said the stranger, who had now quitted the rein of his horse, and was advancing towards the inn door, when he was encountered by the goodly form of Giles Gosling himself.

"Is it logic you talk of, Sir Guest?" said the host; "why then, have at you with a downright consequence—

'The horse to the rack,
And to fire with the sack.'"

"Amen! with all my heart, my good host," said the stranger; "let it be a quart of your best canaries, and give me your good help to drink it."

As he spoke thus, the landlord, with much semblance of hearty welcome, ushered his guest into a large low chamber, where several persons were seated together in different parties, some drinking, some playing at cards, some conversing, and some, whose business called them to be early risers on the morning, concluding their evening meal, and conferring with the chamberlain about their night's quarters.

The entrance of a stranger procured him that general and careless sort of attention which is usually paid on such occasions, from which the following results were deduced: The guest was one of those who, with a well-made person, and features not in themselves unpleasing, are nevertheless so far from handsome, that, whether from the expression of their features, or the tone of their voice, or from their gait and manner, there arises, on the whole, a disinclination to their society. His attire was a riding-cloak, which, when open, displayed a handsome jerkin overlaid with lace, and belted with a buff girdle, which sustained a broadsword and a pair of pistols.

"You ride well provided, sir," said the host, looking at the weapons as he placed on the table the mulled sack which the traveller had ordered.

"Yes, mine host; I have found the use on't in dangerous times, and I do not, like your modern grandees, turn off my followers the instant they are useless."

"Ay, sir?" said Giles Gosling; "then you are from the Low Countries, the land of pike and caliver?"

"I have been high and low, my friend, broad and wide, far and near. You have gallants among you, I dare undertake, that have made the Virginia voyage, or taken a turn in the Low Countries at least. Come, cudgel your memory. Have you no friends in foreign parts that you would gladly have tidings of?"

"Troth, sir, not I," answered the host, "since ranting Robin of Drysandford was shot at the siege of the Brill. The devil take the caliver that fired the ball, for a blither lad never filled a cup at midnight. But he is dead and gone, and I know not a soldier, or a traveller, who is a soldier's mate, that I would give a peeled codling for."

"By the mass, that is strange. What! so many of our brave English hearts are abroad, and you, who seem to be a man of mark, have no friend, no kinsman, among them!"

"Nay, if you speak of kinsmen," answered Gosling, "I have one wild slip of a kinsman, who left us in the last year of Queen Mary; but he is better lost than found."

"Do not say so, friend, unless you have heard ill of him lately. Many a wild colt has turned out a noble steed.—His name, I pray you?"

"Michael Lambourne," answered the landlord of the Black Bear; "a son of my sister's—there is little pleasure in recollecting either the name or the connection."

"Michael Lambourne!" said the stranger, as if endeavouring to recollect himself—"what, no relation to Michael Lambourne, the gallant cavalier who behaved so bravely at the siege of Venlo, that Grave Maurice thanked him at the head of the army! Men said he was an English cavalier and of no high extraction."

"It could scarcely be my nephew," said Giles Gosling, "for he had not the courage of a hen-partridge for aught but mischief."

"Tush, man," replied the traveller, "never fear but you will have credit by your nephew yet, especially if he be the Michael Lambourne whom I knew, and loved very nearly, or altogether, as well as myself. Can you tell me no mark by which I could judge whether they be the same?"

"Faith, none that I can think of," answered Giles Gosling, "unless that our Mike had the gallows branded on his left shoulder for stealing a silver caudle-cup from Dame Snort of Hogsditch."

"Nay, there you lie like a knave, uncle," said the stranger, slipping aside his ruff, and turning down the sleeve of his doublet from his neck and shoulder; "by this good day, my shoulder is as unscarred as thine own."

"What Mike, boy—Mike!"—exclaimed the host;—"and is it thou, in good earnest? But, Mike, an thy shoulder be unscathed as thou sayest, thou must own that Goodman Thong, the hangman, was merciful in his office, and stamped thee with a cold iron."

"Tush, uncle—truce with your jests. Keep them to season your sour ale, and let us see what hearty welcome thou wilt give a kinsman who has rolled the world around for eighteen years; who has seen the sun set where it rises, and has travelled till the west has become the east!"

"Thou hast brought back one traveller's gift with thee, Mike, as I well see; and that was what thou least didst need to travel for. I remember well, among thine other qualities, there was no crediting a word which came from thy mouth."

"Here's an unbelieving Pagan for you, gentlemen!" said Michael Lambourne, turning to those who witnessed this strange interview betwixt uncle and nephew, some of whom, being natives of the village, were no strangers to his juvenile wildness. "This may be called slaying a Cumnor fatted calf for me with a vengeance.—But, uncle, I come not from the husks and the swine-trough, and I care not for thy welcome or no welcome; I carry that with me will make me welcome, wend where I will."

So saying, he pulled out a purse of gold, indifferently well filled, the sight of which produced a visible effect upon the company. Some shook their heads, and whispered to each other, while one or two of the less scrupulous speedily began to recollect him as a school-companion, a townsman, or so forth. On the other hand, two or three grave sedate-looking persons shook their heads, and left the inn, hinting, that if Giles Gosling wished to continue to thrive, he should turn his thriftless, godless nephew adrift again, as soon as he could. Gosling demeaned himself as if he were much of the same opinion; for even the sight of the gold made less impression on the honest gentleman than it usually doth upon one of his calling.

"Kinsman Michael," he said, "put up thy purse. My sister's son shall be called to no reckoning in my house for supper or lodging; and I reckon thou wilt hardly wish to stay longer, where thou art e'en but too well known."

"For that matter, uncle," replied the traveller, "I shall consult my own needs and conveniences. Meantime, I wish to give the supper and sleeping cup to those good townsmen, who are not too proud to remember Mike Lambourne, the tapster's boy. In the New World have I been, man—in the Eldorado, where urchins play at cherry-pit with diamonds, and country wenches thread rubies for necklaces, instead of rowan-tree berries; where the pantiles are made of pure gold, and the paving stones of virgin silver."

"By my credit, friend Mike," said young Laurence Goldthred, the cutting mercer of Abingdon, "that were a likely coast to trade to. Dost thou remember, Mike, what thou saidst when the schoolmaster's ferule was over thee for striking up thy father's crutches?—it is a wise child, saidst thou, that knows its own father. Dr. Bircham laughed till he cried again, and his crying saved yours."

"Well, he made it up to me many a day after," said Lambourne; "and how is the worthy pedagogue?"

"Dead," said Giles Gosling, "this many a day since."

"Well, peace be with him," said Mike, "he owes me nothing."

"No, truly," replied Goldthred; "and every lash which he laid on thee, he always was wont to say, he spared the hangman a labour."

"*Voto a dois!*" exclaimed Lambourne, his patience appearing to fail him, as he snatched his broad slouched hat from the table and placed it on his head, so that the shadow gave the sinister expression of a Spanish bravo to eyes and features which naturally boded nothing pleasant. "Harkee, my masters—all is fair among friends, and under the rose; and I have already permitted my worthy uncle here, and all of you, to use your pleasure with the frolics of my nonage. But I carry sword and dagger, my good friends, and can use them lightly too, upon occasion—I have learned to be dangerous upon points of honour ever since I served the Spaniard, and I would not have you provoke me to the degree of falling foul."

"Come, come," said the host, interposing, "I will have no swaggering here.—Nephew, it will become you best to show no haste to take offence; and you, gentlemen, will do well to remember, that if you are in an inn, still you are the innkeeper's guests, and should spare the honour of his family.—I protest your silly broils make me as oblivious as yourself; for yonder sits my silent guest as I call him, who hath been my two days' inmate, and hath never spoken a word, save to ask for his food and his reckoning—gives no more trouble than a very peasant—pays his shot like a prince royal—looks but at the sum total of the reckoning, and does not know what day he shall go away. Oh, 'tis a jewel of a guest! and yet, hang-dog that I am, I have suffered him to sit by himself like a castaway in yonder obscure nook, without so much as asking him to take bite or sup along with us. It were but the right guerdon of my incivility, were he to set off to the Hare and Tabor before the night grows older."

With his white napkin gracefully arranged over his left arm, his velvet cap laid aside for the moment, and his best silver flagon in his right hand, mine host walked up to the solitary guest whom he mentioned, and thereby turned upon him the eyes of the assembled company.

He was a man aged between twenty-five and thirty, rather above the middle size, dressed with plainness and decency, yet bearing an air of ease, which almost amounted to dignity, and which seemed to infer that his habit was rather beneath his rank. His countenance was reserved and thoughtful, with dark hair and dark eyes—the last, upon any momentary excitement, sparkled with uncommon lustre, but on other occasions had the same meditative and tranquil cast which was exhibited by his features. Giles Gosling, head-borough of the place, and a steady friend to Queen Elizabeth and the Protestant religion, was at one time inclined to suspect his guest of being a Jesuit, or seminary priest, of whom Rome and Spain sent at this time so many to grace the gallows in England. But it was scarce possible to retain such a prepossession against a guest who gave so little trouble, paid his reckoning so regularly, and who proposed, as it seemed, to make a considerable stay at the bonny Black Bear.

Honest Giles, therefore, satisfied himself that his guest was no Roman, and with all comely courtesy besought the stranger to pledge him in a draught of the cool tankard, and honour with his attention a small collation which he was giving to his nephew, in honour of his return, and, as he verily hoped, of his reformation. The stranger at first shook his head, as if declining the courtesy; but mine host proceeded to urge him with arguments founded on the credit of his house, and the construction which the good people of Cumnor might put upon such an unsocial humour.

"By my faith, sir," he said, "it touches my reputation that men should be merry in my house, and we have ill tongues amongst us at Cumnor (as where be there not?) who put an evil mark on men who pull their hat over their brows as if they were looking back to the days that are gone, instead of enjoying the blithe sunshiny weather which God hath sent us in the sweet looks of our sovereign mistress, Queen Elizabeth, whom Heaven long bless and preserve! Here be a set of good fellows willing to be merry; do not scowl on them like the devil looking over Lincoln."

"You say well, my worthy host," said the guest with a melancholy smile, which, melancholy as it was, gave a very pleasant expression to his countenance—"You say well, my jovial friend; and they that are moody like myself, should not disturb the mirth of those who are happy—I will drink a round with your guests with all my heart, rather than be termed a mar-feast. And your nephew, mine host; this same Michael Lambourne, who is lord of the feast—is he, too, such a would-be ruffler as the rest of them?"

"Why, there you push me hard," said the host my nephew is my nephew, and though he was a desperate Dick of yore, yet Mike may have mended like other folks, you wot —And I would not have you think all I said of him, even now, was strict gospel—I knew the wag all the while, and wished to pluck his plumes from him—And now, sir, by what name shall I present my worshipful guest to these gallants?"

"Marry, mine host," replied the stranger, "you may call me Tressilian."

"Tressilian?" answered my host of the Bear, "a worthy name; and, as I think, of Cornish lineage; for what says the south proverb—

'By Pol, Tre, and Pen,
You may know the Cornish men.'

Shall I say the worthy Mr. Tressilian of Cornwall?"

"Say no more than I have given you warrant for, mine host, and so shall you be sure you speak no more than is true. A man may have one of those honourable prefixes to his name, yet be born far from Saint Michael's Mount."

Mine host pushed his curiosity no farther, but presented Mr. Tressilian to his nephew's company, who, after exchange of salutations, and drinking to the health of their new companion, pursued the conversation in which he found them engaged, seasoning it with many an intervening pledge.

II

After some brief interval, Master Goldthred, at the earnest instigation of mine host, and the joyous concurrence of his guests, indulged the company with the following morsel of melody:—

"Of all the birds on bush or tree,
Commend me to the owl,
Since he may best ensample be
To those the cup that trowl.
For when the sun hath left the west,
He chooses the tree that he loves the best,
And he whoops out his song, and he laughs at his jest,
Then, though hours be late, and weather foul,
We'll drink to the health of the bonny, bonny owl.

"The lark is but a bumpkin fowl,
He sleeps in his nest till morn:
But my blessing upon the jolly owl,
That all night blows his horn.
Then up with your cup till you stagger in speech,
And match me this catch though you swagger and screech,
And drink till you wink, my merry men each,
For though hours be late, and weather be foul,
We'll drink to the health of the bonny, bonny owl."

"There is savour in this, my hearts," said Michael, when the mercer had finished his song, "and some goodness seems left among you yet—but what a bead-roll you have read me of old comrades, and to every man's name tacked some ill-omened motto! And so Swashing Will of Wallingford hath bid us good-night?"

"He died the death of a fat buck," said one of the party, "being shot with a crossbow bolt, by old Thatcham, the Duke's stout park-keeper at Donington Castle."

"Nay, after these baulks," said Michael Lambourne, "I need hardly inquire after Tony Foster; for when ropes, and crossbow shafts, and pursuivant's warrants, and such like gear, were so rife, Tony could hardly 'scape them."

"Which Tony Foster mean you?" said the innkeeper.

"Why, he they called Tony Fire-the-Fagot, because he brought a light to kindle the pile round Latimer and Ridley when the wind blew out Jack Thong's torch, and no man else would give him light for love or money."

"Tony Foster lives and thrives," said the host. "But, kinsman, I would not have you call him Tony Fire-the-Fagot, if you would not brook the stab."

"How! is he grown ashamed on't?" said Lambourne; "why he was wont to boast of it, and say he liked as well to see a roasted heretic as a roasted ox."

"Ay, but, kinsman, that was in Mary's time," replied the landlord, "when Tony's father was Reeve here to the Abbot of Abingdon. But since that, Tony married a pure precisian, and is as good a Protestant, I warrant you, as the best."

"And looks grave, and holds his head high, and scorns his old companions," said the mercer.

"Then he hath prospered, I warrant him," said Lambourne; "for ever when a man hath got nobles of his own, he keeps out of the way of those whose exchequers lie in other men's purchase."

"Prospered, quotha!" said the mercer; "why, you remember Cumnor Place, the old mansion-house beside the churchyard?"

"By the same token, I robbed the orchard three times—what of that? It was the old Abbot's residence when there was plague or sickness at Abingdon."

"Ay," said the host, "but that has been long over; and Anthony Foster hath a right in it, and lives there by some grant from a great courtier, who had the church-lands from the crown; and there he dwells, and has as little to do with any poor wight in Cumnor, as if he were himself a belted knight."

"Nay," said the mercer, "it is not altogether pride in Tony neither—there is a fair lady in the case, and Tony will scarce let the light of day look on her."

"How!" said Tressilian, who now for the first time interfered in their conversation, "did ye not say this Foster was married and to a precisian?"

"Married he was, and to as bitter a precisian as ever ate flesh in Lent; and a cat-and-dog life she led with Tony, as men said. But she is dead, rest be with her, and Tony hath but a slip of a daughter; so it is thought he means to wed this stranger, that men keep such a coil about."

"And why so? I mean, why do they keep a coil about her?" said Tressilian.

"Why, I wot not," answered the host, "except that men say she is as beautiful as an angel, and no one knows whence she comes, and every one wishes to know why she is kept so closely mewed up. For my part, I never saw her—you have, I think, Master Goldthred?"

"That I have, old boy," said the mercer. "Look you, I was riding hither from Abingdon—I passed under the east oriel window of the old mansion, leaving my rein loose on my ambling palfrey's neck, partly for mine ease, and partly that I might have the more leisure to peer about, I hears me the lattice open; and never credit me, sir, if there did not stand there the person of as fair a woman as ever crossed mine eyes; and I think I have looked on as many pretty wenches, and with as much judgment, as other folks."

"May I ask her appearance, sir?" said Tressilian.

"Oh, sir," replied Master Goldthred, "I promise you, she was in gentlewoman's attire—a very quaint and pleasing dress, that might have served the Queen herself; for she had a forepart with body and sleeves, of ginger coloured satin, which, in my judgment, must have cost by the yard some thirty shillings, lined with murrey taffeta, and laid down and guarded with two broad laces of gold and silver."

"I did not ask you of her attire, sir," said Tressilian, with some impatience, "but of her complexion—the colour of her hair, her features."

"I tell thee," said the mercer, somewhat disconcerted, "I had little time to look at her; for just as I was about to give her the good time of day, up started of a sudden Tony Foster himself, with a cudgel in his hand and spoke of laying on, and asked why I did not keep the public road, and such like; and I would have knocked him over the pate handsomely for his pains, only for the lady's presence, who might have swooned, for what I know."

"Now, out upon thee for a faint-spirited slave!" said Lambourne; "what adventurous knight ever thought of the lady's terror, when he went to thwack giant, dragon, or magician, in her presence, and for her deliverance? But why talk to thee of dragons, who would be driven back by a dragon-fly? There thou hast missed the rarest opportunity!"

"Take it thyself, then, bully Mike," answered Goldthred. "Yonder is the enchanted manor, and the dragon, and the lady, all at thy service, if thou darest venture on them."

"Why, so I would for a quartern of sack," said the soldier. "Or stay—I am foully out of linen—wilt thou bet a piece of Hollands against these five angels, that I go not up to the Hall to-morrow, and force Tony Foster to introduce me to his fair guest?"

"I accept your wager," said the mercer; "and I think, though thou hadst even the impudence of the devil, I shall gain on thee this bout. Our landlord here shall hold stakes, and I will stake down gold till I send the linen."

"I would gladly pay your halves of the risk, sir," said

Tressilian, "to be permitted to accompany you on the adventure."

"In what would that advantage you, sir?" answered Lambourne.

"In nothing, sir," said Tressilian, "unless to mark the skill and valour with which you conduct yourself. I am a traveller, who seeks for strange encounters and uncommon passages, as the knights of yore did after adventures and feats of arms."

"Nay, if it pleasures you to see a trout tickled," answered Lambourne, "I care not how many witness my skill. And so here I drink success to my enterprise; and he that will not pledge me on his knees is a rascal, and I will cut his legs off by the garters!"

The draught which Michael Lambourne took upon this occasion had been preceded by so many others, that reason tottered on her throne. He swore one or two incoherent oaths at the mercer, who refused, reasonably enough, to pledge him to a sentiment which inferred the loss of his own wager.

"Wilt thou chop logic with me," said Lambourne, "thou knave, with no more brains than a skein of ravelled silk? By Heaven, I will cut thee into fifty yards of galloon lace!"

But as he attempted to draw his sword for this doughty purpose, Michael Lambourne was seized upon by the tapster and the chamberlain, and conveyed to his own apartment, there to sleep himself sober at his leisure.

The party then broke up, and the guests took their leave; much more to the contentment of mine host than of some of the company, who were unwilling to quit good liquor, when it was to be had for free cost, so long as they were able to sit by it.

III

"AND how doth your kinsman, good mine host?" said Tressilian, when Giles Gosling first appeared in the public room on the morning following the revel which we described in the last chapter. "Is he well, and will he abide by his wager?"

"For well, sir, he started two hours since, and has visited I know not what purlieus of his old companions; hath but now returned, and is at this instant breakfasting on new-laid eggs and muscadine; and for his wager, I caution you as a friend to have little to do with that, or indeed aught that Mike proposes. No, by Heaven! I might wink, and let him catch such a small butterfly as Goldthred; but thou, my guest, shalt be forewarned, forearmed, so thou wilt but listen to thy trusty host."

"Why, mine host, thy counsel shall not be cast away," replied Tressilian; "however, I must uphold my share in this wager, having once passed my word to that effect. But, lend me, I pray, some of thy counsel.—This Foster, who, or what is he, and why makes he such mystery of his female inmate?"

"Troth," replied Gosling, "I can add but little to what you heard last night. He was one of Queen Mary's Papists, and now he is one of Queen Elizabeth's Protestants; he was an on-hanger of the Abbot of Abingdon, and now he lives as master of the Manor-house. Above all, he was poor and is rich. He has sulky ways too, breaking off intercourse with all that are of the place, as if he had either some strange secret to keep, or held himself to be made of another clay than we are. I think it likely my kinsman and he will quarrel, if Mike thrust his acquaintance on him; and I am sorry that you, my worthy Master Tressilian, will still think of going in my nephew's company."

Tressilian again answered him, that he would proceed with great caution, and that he should have no fears on his account; in short, he bestowed on him all the customary assurances with which those who are determined on a rash action, are wont to parry the advice of their friends.

Meantime, the traveller accepted the landlord's invitation, and had just finished the excellent breakfast which was served to him and Gosling by pretty Cicely, the beauty of the bar, when the hero of the preceding night, Michael Lambourne, entered the apartment. His toilette had apparently cost him some labour, for his clothes, which differed from those he wore on his journey, were of the newest fashion, and put on with great attention to the display of his person.

"You hold your purpose, then, of visiting your old acquaintance!" said Tressilian to the adventurer.

"Ay, sir," replied Lambourne; "when stakes are made, the game must be played; that is gamester's law, all over the world. You, sir, unless my memory fails me (for I did steep in somewhat too deeply in the sack-butt), took some share in my hazard."

"I propose to accompany you in your adventure," said Tressilian, "if you will do me so much grace as to permit me; and I have staked my share of the forfeit in the hands of our worthy host."

"That he hath," answered Giles Gosling, "in as fair Harry-nobles as ever were melted into sack by a good fellow. So, luck to your enterprise, since you will needs venture on Tony Foster; but, by my credit, you had better take another draught before you depart, for your welcome at the Hall, yonder, will be somewhat of the driest. And if you do get into peril, beware of taking to cold steel; but send for me, Giles Gosling the head-borough, and I may be able to make something out of Tony yet, for as proud as he is."

The nephew dutifully obeyed his uncle's hint, by taking a second powerful pull at the tankard, observing, that his wit never served him so well as when he had washed his temples with a deep morning's draught—and they set forth together for the habitation of Anthony Foster.

The village of Cumnor is pleasantly built on a hill, and in a wooded park closely adjacent was situated the ancient mansion occupied at this time by Anthony Foster, of which the ruins may be still extant. Lambourne knocked roundly and boldly at the huge door of the mansion, observing at the same time, he had seen a less strong one upon a county jail. It was not until they had knocked more than once, that an aged sour-visaged domestic reconnoitred them through a small square hole in the door, well secured with bars of iron, and demanded what they wanted.

"To speak with Master Foster instantly, on pressing business of the state," was the ready reply of Michael Lambourne.

"Methinks you will find difficulty to make that good," said Tressilian in a whisper to his companion, while the servant went to carry the message to his master.

"Tush," replied the adventurer; "no soldier would go on were he always to consider when and how he should come off. Let us once obtain entrance, and all will go well enough."

In a short time the servant returned, and drawing with a careful hand both bolt and bar, opened the gate, which admitted them through an archway into a square court, surrounded by buildings. Opposite to the arch was another door, which the serving-man in like manner unlocked, and thus introduced them into a stone-paved parlour, where there was but little furniture, and that of the rudest and most ancient fashion. They waited some space in the apartment ere the present master of the mansion at length made his appearance. Prepared as he was to see an inauspicious and ill-looking person, the ugliness of Anthony Foster considerably exceeded what Tressilian had anticipated. He was of middle stature, built strongly, but so clumsily as to border on deformity, and to give all his motions the ungainly awkwardness of a left-legged and left-handed man. He raised his eyes as he entered the room, and fixed a keenly penetrating glance upon his two visitors, then cast them down as if counting his steps, while he advanced slowly into the middle of the room, and said, in a low and smothered tone of voice, "Let me pray you, gentlemen, to tell me the cause of this visit."

He looked as if he expected the answer from Tressilian, but it was Michael who replied to him, with the easy familiarity of an old friend, and a tone which seemed unembarrassed by any doubt of the most cordial reception.

"Ha! my dear friend and ingle, Tony Foster!" he exclaimed, seizing upon the unwilling hand, and shaking it with such emphasis as almost to stagger the sturdy frame of the person whom he addressed; "how fares it with you for many a long year?—What! have you altogether forgotten your friend gossip, and playfellow, Michael Lambourne?"

"Michael Lambourne!" said Foster, looking at him a moment; then dropping his eyes, and with little ceremony extricating his hand from the friendly grasp of the person by whom he was addressed, "are you Michael Lambourne?"

"Ay; sure as you are Anthony Foster," replied Lambourne.

"Hark you, Michael Lambourne," said Foster; "you are a gambler now, and live by the counting of chances—Compute me the odds that I do not, on this instant, throw you out of that window into the ditch there."

"Twenty to one that you do not," answered the sturdy visitor. I am younger and stronger than you, and have in me a double portion of the fighting devil, though not, it may be, quite so much of the undermining fiend, that finds an underground way to his purpose—who hides halters under folk's pillows, and who puts ratsbane into their porridge, as the stage-play says."

Foster looked at him earnestly, then turned away, and paced the room twice, with the same steady and considerate pace with which he had entered it; then suddenly came back, and extended his hand to Michael Lambourne, saying, "Be not wroth with me, good Mike; I did but try whether thou hadst parted with aught of thine old and honourable frankness, which your enviers and backbiters called saucy impudence. But who is this gallant, honest Mike?—is he a Corinthian—a cutter like thyself?"

"I prithee, know Master Tressilian, bully Foster," replied Lambourne, presenting his friend in answer to his friend's question; "know him and honour him, for he is a gentleman of many admirable qualities; and though he traffics not in my line of business, at least so far as I know, he has, nevertheless, a just respect and admiration for artists of our class. He will come to in time, as seldom fails; but as yet he is only a Neophyte, only a proselyte, and frequents the company of cocks of the game, as a puny fencer does the schools of the masters, to see how a foil is handled by the teachers of defence."

"If such be his quality, I will pray your company in another chamber, honest Mike, for what I have to say to thee is for thy private ear. Meanwhile, I pray you, sir, to abide us in this apartment, and without leaving it—there be those in this house who would be alarmed by the sight of a stranger."

Tressilian acquiesced, and the two worthies left the apartment together, in which he remained alone to await their return.

IV

THE room into which the Master of Cumnor Place conducted his worthy visitant, was of greater extent than that in which they had at first conversed, and had yet more the appearance of dilapidation. Large oaken presses, filled with shelves of the same wood, surrounded the room, and had, at one time, served for the arrangement of a numerous collection of books, many of which yet remained, but torn and defaced, covered with dust, deprived of their costly clasps and bindings, and tossed together in heaps upon the shelves, as things altogether disregarded, and abandoned to the pleasure of every spoiler. The very presses themselves seemed to have incurred the hostility of those enemies of learning, who had destroyed the volumes of which they had been heretofore filled. They were in several places dismantled of their shelves, and otherwise broken, and damaged, and were, moreover, mantled with cobwebs, and covered with dust.

"The men who wrote these books," said Lambourne, looking round him, "little thought whose keeping they were to fall into."

"Nor what yeoman's service they were to do me," quoth Anthony Foster—"the cook hath used them for scouring his pewter, and the groom hath had nought else to clean my boots with this many a month past, but let us rather to the point, and say to me in one word, what is thy business with me, and what hopes have drawn thee hither?"

"The hope of bettering myself, to be sure," answered Lambourne, "as the old woman said, when she leapt over the bridge at Kingston. Look you, this purse has all that is left of as round a sum as a man would wish to carry in his slop-pouch. You are here well established, it would seem, and, as I think, well befriended, for men talk of your being under some special protection; nay, stare not like a pig that is stuck, man, thou canst not dance in a net and they not see thee. Now I know such protection is not purchased for nought; you must have services to render for it, and in these I propose to help thee."

"But how if I lack no assistance from thee, Mike? I think thy modesty might suppose that were a case possible."

"That is to say," retorted Lambourne, "that you would engross the whole work, rather than divide the reward—but be not over-greedy, Anthony. Thy patron will need the aid of both, and can well afford to requite it. Thou hast deep sagacity—an unrelenting purpose—a steady long-breathed malignity of nature, that surpasses mine. But then, I am the bolder, the more ready, both at action and expedient. Separate, our properties are not so perfect; but unite them, and we drive the world before us. How sayest thou—shall we hunt in couples?"

"It is a currish proposal—thus to thrust thyself upon my private matters," replied Foster; "but thou wert ever an ill-nurtured whelp."

"You shall have no cause to say so, unless you spurn my courtesy," said Michael Lambourne; "but if so, keep thee well from me, Sir Knight, as the romance has it. I will either share your counsels or traverse them; for I have come here to be busy, either with thee or against thee."

"Well," said Anthony Foster, "since thou dost leave me so fair a choice, I will rather be thy friend than thine enemy. Thou art right; I *can* prefer thee to the service of a patron, who has enough of means to make us both, and an hundred more. And, to say truth, thou art well qualified for his service. Boldness and dexterity he demands—the justice-books bear witness in thy favour; no starting at scruples in his service—why, who ever suspected thee of a conscience?—an assurance he must have, who would follow a courtier—and thy brow is as impenetrable as a Milan visor. There is but one thing I would fain see amended in thee."

"And what is that, my most precious friend Anthony?" replied Lambourne; "for I swear by the pillow of the Seven Sleepers, I will not be slothful in amending it."

"Why, you gave a sample of it even now," said Foster. "Your speech twangs too much of the old stamp, and you garnish it ever and anon with singular oaths that savour of Papistrie. Besides, your exterior man is altogether too deboshed and irregular to become one of his lordships followers, since he has a reputation to keep up in the eye of the world. There is a change since you knew the English world; and there are those who can hold their way through the boldest courses, and the most secret, and yet never a swaggering word, or an oath, or a profane word in their conversation."

"That is to say," replied Lambourne, "they are in a trading copartnery, to do the devil's business without mentioning his name in the firm?—Well, I will do my best to counterfeit rather than lose ground in this new world, since thou sayest it is grown so precise. But, Anthony, what is the name of this nobleman, in whose service I am to turn hypocrite?"

At this moment their conversation was interrupted by a scream from the next apartment.

"By the holy cross of Abingdon," exclaimed Anthony Foster, forgetting his Protestantism in his alarm, "I am a ruined man!"

So saying, he rushed into the apartment whence the scream issued, followed by Michael Lambourne. But to account for the sounds which interrupted their conversation, it is necessary to recede a little way in our narrative.

It has been already observed, that when Lambourne accompanied Foster into the library, they left Tressilian alone in the ancient parlour. His dark eye followed them forth of the apartment with a glance of contempt, a part of which his mind instantly transferred to himself for having stooped to be even for a moment their familiar companion. "These are the associates, Amy,"—it was thus he communed with himself,—"to which thy cruel levity—thine unthinking and most unmerited falsehood has condemned him, of whom his friends once hoped for other things, and who now scorns himself, as he will be scorned by others, for the baseness he stoops to for the love of thee! But I will not leave the pursuit of thee, once the object of my purest and most devoted affection, though to me thou canst henceforth be nothing but a thing to weep over—I will save thee from thy betrayer, and from thyself—I will restore thee to thy parents—to thy God. I cannot bid the bright star again sparkle in the sphere it has shot from, but——"

A slight noise in the apartment interrupted his reverie; he looked round, and in the beautiful and richly-attired female who entered at that instant by a side-door he recognised the object of his search. The first impulse arising from this discovery urged him to conceal his face with the collar of his cloak, until he should find a favourable moment of making himself known. But his purpose was disconcerted by the young lady (she was not above eighteen years old), who ran joyfully towards him, and pulling him by the cloak, said playfully, "Nay, my sweet friend, after I have waited for you so long you come not to my bower to play the masquer—You are arraigned of treason to true love and fond affection; and you must stand up at the bar, and answer it with face uncovered—how say you, guilty or not?"

"Alas, Amy!" said Tressilian, in a low and melancholy tone, as he suffered her to draw the mantle from his face. The sound of his voice, and still more the unexpected sight of his face, changed in an instant the lady's playful mood—She staggered back, turned as pale as death, and put her hands before her face. Tressilian was himself for a moment much overcome, but seeming suddenly to remember the necessity of using an opportunity which might not again occur, he said in a low tone, "Amy, fear me not."

"Why should I fear you?" said the lady, withdrawing her hands from her beautiful face, which was now covered with crimson,—"why should I fear you, Mr. Tressilian?—or wherefore have you intruded yourself into my dwelling, uninvited, sir, and unwished for?"

"Your dwelling, Amy!" said Tressilian. "Alas! is a prison your dwelling?—a prison, guarded by one of the most sordid of men, but not a greater wretch than his employer!"

"This house is mine," said Amy, "mine while I choose to inhabit it.—If it is my pleasure to live in seclusion, who shall gainsay me?"

"Your father, maiden," answered Tressilian, "your broken-hearted father; who despatched me in quest of you with that authority which he cannot exert in person. Here is his letter, written while he blessed his pain of body which somewhat stunned the agony of his mind."

"The pain!—is my father then ill?" said the lady.

"So ill," answered Tressilian, "that even your utmost haste may not restore him to health, but all shall be instantly prepared for your departure the instant you yourself will give consent."

"Tressilian," answered the lady, "I cannot, I must not, I dare not leave this place. Go back to my father—tell him I will obtain leave to see him within twelve hours from hence. Go back, Tressilian—tell him I am well, I am happy—happy could I think he was so—tell him not to fear that I will come, and in such a manner that all the grief Amy has given him shall be forgotten—the poor Amy is now greater than she dare name.—Go, carry him the news—I come as sure as there is light in heaven—that is, when I obtain permission."

"Permission!—permission to visit your father on his sick-bed, perhaps on his death-bed!" repeated Tressilian impatiently; "and permission from whom?—From the villain who, under disguise of friendship, abused every duty of hospitality, and stole thee from thy father's roof!"

"Do him no slander, Tressilian!—He whom thou speakest of wears a sword as sharp as thine—sharper, vain man—for the best deeds thou hast ever done in peace or war, were as unworthy to be named with his, as thy obscure rank to match itself with the sphere he moves in.—Leave me! Go, do mine errand to my father, and when he next sends to me, let him choose a more welcome messenger."

"Amy," replied Tressilian, calmly, "thou canst not move me by thy reproaches.—Tell me one thing, that I may bear at least one ray of comfort to my aged friend—This rank of his which thou dost boast—dost thou share it with him, Amy?—Does he claim a husband's right to control thy motions?"

"Stop thy base unmannered tongue!" said the lady; "to no question that derogates from my honour do I deign an answer."

"You have said enough in refusing to reply," answered Tressilian; "and mark me, unhappy as thou art, I am armed with thy father's full authority to command thy obedience, and I will save thee from the slavery of sin and of sorrow, even despite of thyself, Amy."

As he spoke, he advanced and extended his arm, as with the purpose of laying hold upon her. But she shrunk back from his grasp, and uttered the scream which, as we before noticed, brought into the apartment Lambourne and Foster.

The latter exclaimed, as soon as he entered, "Fire and fagot! what have we here?" Then, addressing the lady in a tone betwixt entreaty and command, he added, "Uds precious! madam, what make you here out of bounds?—Retire—retire—there is life and death in this matter.—And you, friend, whoever you may be, leave this house—out with you, before my dagger's hilt and your costard become acquainted—Draw, Mike, and rid us of the knave!"

"Not I, on my soul," replied Lambourne; "he came hither in my company, and he is safe from me by cutter's law, at least till we meet again.—But hark ye, my Cornish comrade, you have brought a Cornish flaw of wind with you hither, a hurricanoe as they call it in the Indies. Make yourself scarce—depart—vanish—or we'll have you summoned before the Mayor of Halgaver, and that before Dudman and Ramhead meet."[1]

"Away, base groom!" said Tressilian—"And you, madam, fare you well—what life lingers in your father's bosom will leave him at the news I have to tell."

He departed, the lady saying faintly as he left the room, "Tressilian, be not rash—say no scandal of me."

"Here is proper gear," said Foster. "I pray you go to your chamber, my lady, and let us consider how this is to be answered—nay, tarry not."

"I move not at your command, sir," answered the lady.

"Nay, but you must, fair lady," replied Foster; "excuse my freedom, but, by blood and nails, this is no time to strain courtesies—you *must* go to your chamber.—Mike, follow that meddling coxcomb, and as you desire to thrive, see him safely clear of the premises, while I bring this headstrong lady to reason.—Draw thy tool, man, and after him."

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[1] Two headlands on the Cornish coast. The expressions are proverbial.

"I'll follow him," said Michael Lambourne, "and see him fairly out of Flanders—But for hurting a man I have drunk my morning's draught withal, 'tis clean against my conscience." So saying, he left the apartment.

Tressilian, meanwhile, with hasty steps, pursued the first path which promised to conduct him through the wild and overgrown part in which the mansion of Foster was situated. Haste and distress of mind led his steps astray, and instead of taking the avenue which led towards the village, he chose another, which, after he had pursued it for some time with a hasty and reckless step, conducted him to the other side of the demesne, where a postern-door opened through the wall, and led him into the open country.

As Tressilian approached to try some means of opening the door, or climbing over it, he perceived there was a key put into the lock from the outside. It turned round, the bolt revolved, and a cavalier who entered, muffled in his riding cloak, and wearing a slouched hat, with a drooping feather, stood at once within four yards of him who was desirous of going out. They exclaimed at once, in tones of resentment and surprise, the one "Varney!" the other "Tressilian!"

"What make you here?" was the stern question put by the stranger to Tressilian, when the moment of surprise was passed,—"What make you here, where your presence is ither expected or desired?"

"Nay, Varney," replied Tressilian, "what make *you* here? re you come to triumph over the innocence you have stroyed, as the vulture or carrion-crow comes to batten the lamb, whose eyes it has first plucked out?—Or are u come to encounter the merited vengeance of an honest an?—Draw, dog, and defend thyself!"

Tressilian drew his sword as he spoke, but Varney only id his hand on the hilt of his own, as he replied, "Thou art ad, Tressilian—I own appearances are against me, but by ery oath a priest can make, or a man can swear, Mistress my Robsart hath had no injury from me; and in truth I ere somewhat loath to hurt you in this cause—Thou know'st can fight."

"I have heard thee say so, Varney," replied Tressilian; but now, methinks, I would fain have some better evidence an thine own word."

"That shall not be lacking, if blade and hilt be but true me," answered Varney; and drawing his sword with the right hand he threw his cloak around his left, and attacked

Tressilian with a vigour which for a moment seemed to give him the advantage of the combat. But this advantage lasted not long. Tressilian added to a spirit determined on revenge, a hand and eye admirably well adapted to the use of the rapier; so that Varney, finding himself hard pressed in his turn, endeavoured to avail himself of his superior strength, by closing with his adversary. Varney, in his ill-advised attempt, received a fall so sudden and violent, that his sword flew several paces from his hand, and ere he could recover his feet, that of his antagonist was pointed to his throat.

"Give me the instant means of relieving the victim of thy treachery," said Tressilian, "or take the last look of your Creator's blessed sun!"

And while Varney, too confused or too sullen to reply, made a sudden effort to rise, his adversary drew back his arm, and would have executed his threat, but that the blow was arrested by the grasp of Michael Lambourne, who, directed by the clashing of swords, had come up just in time to save the life of Varney.

"Come, come, comrade," said Lambourne, "here is enough done and more than enough—put up your fox, and let us be jogging—The Black Bear growls for us. In the meanwhile, do you see, shog—tramp—begone—we are two to one."

He spoke truth, for Varney had taken the opportunity to regain his weapon, and Tressilian perceived it was madness to press the quarrel farther against such odds. He took his purse from his side, and taking out two gold nobles, flung them to Lambourne; "There, caitiff, is thy morning wage—thou shalt not say thou has been my guide unhired. Varney, farewell—we shall meet where there are none to come betwixt us." So saying, he turned round and departed through the postern-door.

Varney seemed to want the inclination, or perhaps the power (for his fall had been a severe one) to follow his retreating enemy. But he glared darkly as he disappeared, and then addressed Lambourne; "Art thou a comrade of Foster's, good fellow?"

"Sworn friends, as the haft is to the knife," replied Michael Lambourne.

"Here is a broad piece for thee—follow yonder fellow, and see where he takes earth, and bring me word up to the mansion house here. Cautious and silent, thou knave, as thou valuest thy throat."

"Enough said," replied Lambourne; "I can draw on a scent as well as a sleuth-hound."

"Begone then," said Varney, sheathing his rapier; and, turning his back on Michael Lambourne, he walked slowly towards the house. Lambourne stopped but an instant to gather the nobles which his late companion had flung towards him so unceremoniously, and muttered to himself, while he put them up in his purse along with the gratuity of Varney, "I spoke to yonder gulls of Eldorado—By Saint Anthony, there is no Eldorado for men of our stamp equal to bonny Old England! It rains nobles, by Heaven—they lie on the grass as thick as dew-drops—you may have them for gathering. And if I have not my share of such glittering dew-drops, may my sword melt like an icicle!"

V

Anthony Foster was still engaged in debate with his fair guest, who treated with scorn every entreaty and request that she would retire to her own apartment, when a whistle was heard at the entrance-door of the mansion.

"We are fairly sped now," said Foster; "yonder is thy lord's signal, and what to say about the disorder which has happened in this household, by my conscience, I know not. Some evil fortune dogs the heels of that unhanged rogue Lambourne, and he has 'scaped the gallows against every chance, to come back and be the ruin of me!"

"Peace, sir," said the lady, "and undo the gate to your master. My Lord! my dear lord!" she then exclaimed, hastening to the entrance of the apartment; then added, with a voice expressive of disappointment, "Pooh! it is but Richard Varney!"

"Ay, madam," said Varney, entering and saluting the lady with a respectful obeisance, which she returned with a careless mixture of negligence and of displeasure. "It is but Richard Varney; but even the first grey cloud should be acceptable, when it lightens in the east, because it announces the approach of the blessed sun."

"How! comes my lord hither to-night?" said the lady, in joyful, yet startled agitation; and Anthony Foster caught up the word, and echoed the question. Varney replied to the lady, that his lord purposed to attend her, and would have proceeded with some compliment, when, running to the door of the parlour, she called aloud, "Janet—Janet—come to my tiring-room instantly." Then returning to Varney, she asked if her lord sent any farther commendations to her.

"This letter, honoured madam," said he, taking from his bosom a small parcel wrapt in scarlet silk, "and with it a token to the Queen of his Affections." With eager speed the lady hastened to undo the silken string which surrounded the little packet, and failing to unloose readily the knot with which it was secured, she again called loudly on Janet, "Bring me a knife—scissors—aught that may undo this envious knot!"

"May not my poor poniard serve, honoured madam?" said Varney, presenting a small dagger of exquisite workmanship, which hung in his turkey-leather sword-belt.

"No, sir," replied the lady, rejecting the instrument which he offered—"Steel poniard shall cut no true love knot of mine."

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"It has cut many, however," said Anthony Foster, half aside, and looking at Varney. By this time the knot was disentangled without any other help than the neat and nimble fingers of Janet, a simply-attired pretty maiden, the daughter of Anthony Foster, who came running at the repeated call of her mistress. A necklace of orient pearl, the companion of a perfumed billet, was now hastily produced from the packet. The lady gave the one, after a slight glance, to the charge of her attendant, while she read, or rather devoured, the contents of the other.

"Surely, lady," said Janet, gazing with admiration at the neck-string of pearls, "the daughters of Tyre wore no fairer neck-jewels than those—And then the posy, 'For a neck that is fairer,'—each pearl is worth a freehold."

"Each word in this dear paper is worth the whole string, my girl—But come to my tiring-room, girl; we must be brave, my lord comes hither to-night.—He bids me grace you, Master Varney, and to me his wish is a law.—I bid you to a collation in my bower this afternoon, and you too, Master Foster. Give orders that all is fitting, and that suitable preparations be made for my lord's reception to-night." With these words she left the apartment.

"She takes state on her already," said Varney, "and distributes the favour of her presence, as if she were already the partner of his dignity.—Well—it is wise to practise beforehand the part which fortune prepares us to play—the young eagle must gaze at the sun, ere he soars on strong wing to meet it."

"If holding her head aloft," said Foster, "will keep her eyes from dazzling, I warrant you the dame will not stoop her crest. She will presently soar beyond reach of my whistle, Master Varney. I promise you, she holds me already in slight regard."

"It is thine own fault, thou sullen uninventive companion," answered Varney, "who know'st no mode of control, save downright brute force.—Canst thou not make home pleasant to her, with music and toys? Canst thou not make the out-of-doors frightful to her, with tales of goblins? Thou livest here by the churchyard, and hast not even wit enough to raise a ghost, to scare thy females into good discipline."

"Speak not thus, Master Varney," said Foster; "the living I fear not, but I trifle not nor toy with my dead neighbours of the churchyard. I promise you, it requires a good heart to live so near it: worthy Master Holdforth, the afternoon's lecturer of Saint Antonlin's, had a sore fright there the last time he came to visit me."

"Hold thy superstitious tongue!" answered Varney;

"and while thou talk'st of visiting, answer me, thou paltering knave, how came Tressilian to be at the postern-door?"

"Tressilian!" answered Foster, "what know I of Tressilian?—I never heard his name."

"Why, villain, it was the very Cornish chough to whom old Sir Hugh Robsart destined his pretty Amy, and hither the hot-brained fool has come to look after his fair runaway: there must be some order taken with him, for he thinks he hath wrong, and is not the mean hind that will sit down with it. Luckily he knows not of my lord, but thinks he has only me to deal with. But how, in the fiend's name, came he hither?"

"Why, with Mike Lambourne, an you must know," answered Foster.

"And who is Mike Lambourne?" demanded Varney. "By Heaven! thou wert best set up a bush over thy door, and invite every stroller who passes by, to see what thou shouldst keep secret even from the sun and air."

"Ay! ay! this is a court-like requital of my service to you, Master Richard Varney," replied Foster. "Didst thou not charge me to seek out for thee a fellow who had a good sword, and an unscrupulous conscience? and was I not busying myself to find a fit man—for, thank Heaven, my acquaintance lies not amongst such companions—when, as Heaven would have it, this tall fellow, who is in all his qualities the very flashing knave thou didst wish, came hither to fix acquaintance upon me in the plenitude of his impudence, and I admitted his claim, thinking to do you a pleasure—and now see what thanks I get for disgracing myself by converse with him!"

"And did he," said Varney, "being such a fellow as thyself, only lacking, I suppose, thy present humour of hypocrisy, which lies as thin over thy hard ruffianly heart as gold lacquer upon rusty iron—did he, I say, bring the saintly, sighing Tressilian in his train?"

"They came together, by Heaven!" said Foster; "and Tressilian—to speak Heaven's truth—obtained a moment's interview with our pretty moppet, while I was talking apart with Lambourne."

"Improvident villain! we are both undone," said Varney. "She has of late been casting many a backward look to her father's halls, whenever her lordly lover leaves her alone. Should this preaching fool whistle her back to her old perch, we were but lost men."

"No fear of that, my master," replied Anthony Foster; "she is in no mood to stoop to his lure, for she yelled out on seeing him as if an adder had stung her."

"That is good.—Canst thou not get from thy daughter an inkling of what passed between them, good Foster?"

"I tell you plain, Master Varney," said Foster, "my daughter shall not enter our purposes, or walk in our paths. They may suit me well enough, who know how to repent of my misdoings; but I will not have my child's soul committed to peril either for your pleasure or my lord's. I may walk among snares and pit-falls myself, because I have discretion, but I will not trust the poor lamb among them."

"Why, thou suspicious fool, I were as averse as thou art that thy baby-faced girl should enter into my plans, or walk to hell at her father's elbow. But indirectly thou mightst gain some intelligence of her."

"And so I did, Master Varney," answered Foster; "and she said her lady called out upon the sickness of her father."

"Good!" replied Varney; "that is a hint worth catching, and I will work upon it. I will show her that all thou hast done in this matter was good service, both to my lord and her; and when she chips the egg-shell and walks alone, she shall own we have hatched her greatness."

"Look to yourself, Master Varney," said Foster, "you may misreckon foully in this matter—She gave you but a frosty reception this morning, and, I think, looks on you, as well as me, with an evil eye."

"You mistake her, Foster—you mistake her utterly—To me she is bound by all the ties which can secure her to one who has been the means of gratifying both her love and ambition. Who was it that took the obscure Amy Robsart, the daughter of an impoverished and dotard knight—the destined bride of a moon-struck, moping enthusiast like Edmund Tressilian, from her lowly fates, and held out to her in prospect the brightest fortune in England, or perchance in Europe? Why, man, it was I, as I have often told thee, that found opportunity for their secret meeting—It was I who watched the wood while he beat for the deer—It was I who, to this day, am blamed by her family as the companion of her flight, and were I in their neighbourhood, would be fain to wear a shirt of better stuff than Holland linen, lest my ribs should be acquainted with Spanish steel. Who carried their letters?—I. Who amused the old knight and Tressilian?—I. Who planned her escape?—it was I. It was I, in short, Dick Varney, who pulled this pretty little daisy from its lowly nook, and placed it in the proudest bonnet in Britain."

"Ay, Master Varney," said Foster, "but it may be she thinks, that had the matter remained with you, the flower had been stuck so slightly into the cap, that the first breath of a changeable breeze of passion had blown the poor daisy to the common."

"She should consider," said Varney, smiling, "the true faith I owed my lord and master prevented me at first from counselling marriage—and yet I did counsel marriage when I saw she would not be satisfied without the—the sacrament, or the ceremony—which callest thou it, Anthony? But, hark—some one knocks at the gate.—Look out of the window—let no one enter—this were an ill night to be interrupted."

"It is he whom we spoke of before dinner," said Foster, as he looked through the casement; "it is Michael Lambourne."

"Oh, admit him, by all means," said the courtier, "he comes to give some account of his guest—it imports us much to know the movements of Edmund Tressilian—Admit him, I say, but bring him not hither—I will come to you presently in the Abbot's library."

Foster left the room, and the courtier, who remained behind, paced the parlour more than once in deep thought, his arms folded on his bosom, until at length he gave vent to his meditations in broken words, which we have somewhat enlarged and connected, that his soliloquy may be intelligible to the reader.

"'Tis true," he said, suddenly stopping, and resting his right hand on the table at which they had been sitting, "this base churl hath fathomed the very depth of my fear, and I have been unable to disguise it from him.—She loves me not—I would it were as true that I loved not her!—Idiot that I was, to move her in my own behalf, when wisdom bade me be a true broker to my lord!—And this fatal error has placed me more at her discretion than a wise man would willingly be at that of the best piece of painted Eve's flesh of them all. Since the hour that my policy made so perilous a slip, I cannot look at her without fear, and hate, and fondness, so strangely mingled, that I know not whether, were it at my choice, I would rather possess or ruin her. I must work an interest in her, either through love or through fear—and who knows but I may yet reap the sweetest and best revenge for her former scorn?—that were indeed a masterpeice of court-like art!—Let me but once be her counsel-keeper—let her confide to me a secret, did it but concern the robbery of a linnet's nest, and, fair Countess, thou art mine own!" He again paced the room in silence, stopped, filled and drank a cup of wine, as if to compose the agitation of his mind; and muttering, "Now for a close heart, and an open and unruffled brow," he left the apartment.

VI

FOUR apartments, which occupied the western side of the old quadrangle at Cumnor Place, had been fitted up with extraordinary splendour. This had been the work of several days prior to that on which our story opened. Workmen sent from London, and not permitted to leave the premises until the work was finished, had converted the apartments in that side of the building, from the dilapidated appearance of a dissolved monastic house, into the semblance of a royal palace. A mystery was observed in all these arrangements; the workmen came thither and returned by night, and all measures were taken to prevent the prying curiosity of the villagers from observing or speculating upon the changes which were taking place in the mansion of their once indigent, but now wealthy neighbour, Anthony Foster. Accordingly, the secrecy desired was so far preserved, that nothing got abroad but vague and uncertain reports, which were received and repeated, but without much credit being attached to them.

On the evening of which we treat, the new and highly decorated suite of rooms were, for the first time, illuminated, and that with a brilliancy which might have been visible half a dozen miles off, had not oaken shutters, carefully secured with bolt and padlock, and mantled with long curtains of silk and of velvet, deeply fringed with gold, prevented the slightest gleam of radiance from being seen without.

The Countess Amy—for to that rank she was exalted by her private but solemn union with England's proudest Earl,—had for a time flitted hastily from room to room, admiring each new proof of her lover and her bridegroom's taste, and feeling that admiration enhanced, as she recollected that all she gazed upon was one continued proof of his ardent and devoted affection.—"How beautiful are these hangings!—How natural these paintings, which seem to contend with life!—How richly wrought is that plate, which looks as if all the galleons of Spain had been intercepted on the broad seas to furnish it forth!—And oh, Janet!" she exclaimed repeatedly to the daughter of Anthony Foster, the close attendant, who, with equal curiosity, but somewhat less ecstatic joy, followed on her mistress's footsteps—"Oh, Janet! how much more delightful to think, that all these fair things have been assembled by his love, for the love of me! and that this evening—this very evening, which grows darker every instant, I shall thank him more for the love that has created such an unimaginable paradise, than for all the wonders it contains!"

"The Lord is to be thanked first," said the pretty Puritan, "who gave thee, lady, the kind and courteous husband, whose love has done so much for thee. I, too, have done my poor share. But if you thus run wildly from room to room, the toil of my crisping and my curling pins will vanish like the frost-work on the window when the sun is high."

"Thou sayest true, Janet," said the young and beautiful Countess, stopping suddenly from her tripping race of enraptured delight, and looking at herself from head to foot in a large mirror, such as she had never before seen, and which, indeed, had few to match it even in the Queen's palace.—"Thou sayest true, Janet!" she answered, as she saw, with pardonable self-applause, the noble mirror reflect such charms as were seldom presented to its fair and polished surface; "I have more of the milkmaid than the countess, with these cheeks flushed with haste, and all these brown curls, which you laboured to bring to order, straying as wild as the tendrils of an unpruned vine—My falling ruff is chafed too, and shows the neck and bosom more than is modest and seemly—Come, Janet—we will practise state—we will go to the withdrawing-room, my good girl, and thou shalt put these rebel locks in order, and imprison within lace and cambric the bosom that beats too high."

They went to the withdrawing apartment accordingly, where the Countess playfully stretched herself upon the pile of Moorish cushions, half-sitting, half-reclining, half-rapt in her own thoughts, half-listening to the prattle of her attendant.

"Now, have done with these busy fingers, Janet," she said to her handmaiden, who was still officiously employed in bringing her hair and her dress into order—"Have done, I say—I must see your father ere my lord arrives, and also Master Richard Varney, whom my lord has highly in his esteem. Call thy father hither, and call Varney also—I cherish resentment against neither; and though I may have some room to be displeased with both, it shall be their own fault if ever a complaint against them reaches the Earl through my means.—Call them hither, Janet."

Janet Foster obeyed her mistress; and in a few minutes after, Varney entered the withdrawing-room with the graceful ease and unclouded front of an accomplished courtier, skilled, under the veil of external politeness, to disguise his own feelings, and to penetrate those of others. Anthony Foster plodded into the apartment after him, his natural gloom vulgarity of aspect seeming to become yet more remarkable from his clumsy attempt to conceal the mixture of anxiety and dislike with which he looked on her, over whom he had hitherto exercised so severe a control, now so splendidly attired, and decked with so many pledges of the interest which she possessed in her husband's affections.

Varney, who, in right of his gentle blood, had pressed into the room before Anthony Foster, knew better what to say than he, and said it with more assurance and a better grace.

The Countess greeted him indeed with an appearance of cordiality, which seemed a complete amnesty for whatever she might have to complain of. She rose from her seat, and advanced two steps towards him, holding forth her hand as she said, "Master Richard Varney, you brought me this morning such welcome tidings, that I fear surprise and joy made me neglect my lord and husband's charge to receive you with distinction. We offer you our hand, sir, in reconciliation."

"I am unworthy to touch it," said Varney, dropping on one knee, "save as a subject honours that of a prince."

"I trust, my lady," said Foster, "that in doing the commands of my lord your husband, in your restraint and so forth, I have not incurred your displeasure, seeing that I did but my duty towards your lord and mine; for Heaven, as Holy Writ saith, hath given the husband supremacy and dominion over the wife—I think it runs so, or something like it."

"I receive at this moment so pleasant a surprise, Master Foster," answered the Countess, "that I cannot but excuse the rigid fidelity which secluded me from these apartments, until they had assumed an appearance so new and so splendid."

"Ay, lady," said Foster, "it hath cost many a fair crown; and that more need not be wasted than is absolutely necessary, I leave you till my lord's arrival with good Master Richard Varney, who, as I think, hath somewhat to say to you, from your most noble lord and husband.—Janet, follow me, to see that all be in order."

"No, Master Foster," said the Countess, "we will your daughter remains here in our apartment: out of ear-shot, however, in case Varney hath aught to say to me from my lord."

Foster made his clumsy reverence, and departed, with an aspect which seemed to grudge the profuse expense, which had been wasted upon changing his house from a bare and ruinous grange to an Asiatic palace. When he was gone, his daughter took her embroidery frame, and went to establish herself at the bottom of the apartment, while Richard Varney, with a profoundly humble courtesy, took the lowest stool he could find, and placing it by the side of the pile of cushions on which the Countess had now again seated herself, sat with his eyes for a time fixed on the ground, and in profound silence.

"I thought, Master Varney," said the Countess, when she saw he was not likely to open the conversation, "that you had something to communicate from my lord and husband; so at least I understood Master Foster, and therefore I removed my waiting-maid. If I am mistaken I will recall her to my side; for her needle is not so absolutely perfect in tent and cross-stitch, but that my superintendence is advisable."

"Lady," said Varney, "Foster was partly mistaken in my purpose. It was not *from*, but *of* your noble husband, and my approved, and most noble patron, that I am led, and indeed bound, to speak."

"The theme is most welcome, sir," said the Countess, "whether it be of or from my noble husband. But be brief, for I expect his hasty approach."

"Briefly, then, madam," replied Varney, "and boldly, for my argument requires both haste and courage—You have this day seen Tressilian?"

"I have, sir, and what of that?" answered the lady somewhat sharply.

"Nothing that concerns me, lady," Varney replied, with humility. "But think you, honoured madam, that your lord will hear it with equal equanimity?"

"Unquestionably," said the Countess. "It will be the first thing I tell him, together with every word that Tressilian said, and that I answered. I shall speak my own shame in this, for Tressilian's reproaches, less just than he esteemed them, were not altogether unmerited—I will speak, therefore, with pain, but I will speak, and speak all."

"Your ladyship will do your pleasure," answered Varney; "but methinks it were as well, since nothing calls for so frank a disclosure, to spare yourself this pain, and my noble lord the disquiet, and Master Tressilian, since belike he must be thought of in the matter, the danger which is like to ensue."

"I can see nought of all these terrible consequences," said the lady, composedly, "unless by imputing to my noble lord unworthy thoughts which I am sure never harboured in his generous heart."

"I am mute, madam," answered Varney; "and as I have no reason to grieve for Tressilian, who would have my heart's blood were he able, I shall reconcile myself easily to what may befall the gentleman, in consequence of your frank disclosure of his having presumed to intrude upon your solitude.—You, who know my lord so much better than I, will judge if he be likely to bear the insult unavenged."

"Nay, if I could think myself the cause of Tressilian's ruin," said the Countess,—"I who have already occasioned him so much distress, I might be brought to be silent.—And yet what will it avail, since he was seen by Foster, and I think by some one else?—No, no, Varney, urge it no more. I will tell the whole matter to my lord; and with such pleading for Tressilian's folly, as shall dispose my lord's generous heart rather to serve than to punish him."

"Your judgment, madam," said Varney, "is far superior to mine, especially as you may, if you will, prove the ice before you step on it, by mentioning Tressilian's name to my lord, and observing how he endures it. For Foster and his attendant, they know not Tressilian by sight, and I can easily give them some reasonable excuse for the appearance of an unknown stranger."

The lady paused for an instant, and then replied, "If, Varney, it be indeed true that Foster knows not as yet that the man he saw was Tressilian, I own I were unwilling he should learn what nowise concerns him. He bears himself already with austerity enough, and I wish him not to be judge or privy-councillor in my affairs."

"Tush," said Varney; "what has the surly groom to do with your ladyship's concerns?—No more, surely, than the ban-dog which watches his court-yard. If he is in aught distasteful to your ladyship, I have interest enough to have him exchanged for a seneschal that shall be more agreeable to you."

"Master Varney," said the Countess, "let us drop this theme—when I complain of the attendants whom my lord has placed around me, it must be to my lord himself.—Hark! I hear the trampling of horse—He comes! he comes!" she exclaimed, jumping up in ecstasy.

"I cannot think it is he," said Varney; "or that you can hear the tread of his horse through the closely-mantled casements."

"Stop me not, Varney—my ears are keener than thine—it is he!"

"But, madam!—but, madam!" exclaimed Varney, anxiously, and still placing himself in her way—"I trust that what I have spoken in humble duty and service, will not be turned to my ruin?—I hope that my faithful advice will not be betrayed to my prejudice?—I implore that"——

"Content thee, man—content thee!" said the Countess, "and quit my skirt—you are too bold to detain me—Content thyself, I think not of thee."

At this moment the folding door flew wide open, and a man of majestic mien, muffled in the folds of a long dark riding-cloak, entered the apartment.

There was some little displeasure and confusion on the Countess's brow, owing to her struggle with Varney's pertinacity; but it was exchanged for an expression of the purest joy and affection, as she threw herself into the arms of the noble stranger who entered, and clasping him to her bosom, exclaimed, "At length—at length thou art come!"

Varney discreetly withdrew as his lord entered, and Janet was about to do the same, when her mistress signed to her to remain. She took her place at the farther end of the apartment, and continued standing, as if ready for attendance.

Meanwhile the Earl, for he was of no inferior rank, returned his lady's caress with the most affectionate ardour, but affected to resist when she strove to take his cloak from him.

"Nay," she said, "but I will unmantle you—I must see if you have kept your word to me, and come as the great Earl men call thee, and not as heretofore like a private cavalier."

"Thou art like the rest of the world, Amy," said the Earl, suffering her to prevail in the playful contest; "the jewels, and feathers, and silk, are more to them than the man whom they adorn—many a poor blade looks gay in a velvet scabbard."

"But so cannot men say of thee, thou noble Earl," said his lady, as the cloak dropped on the floor, and showed him dressed as princes when they ride abroad; "thou art the good and well-tried steel, whose inly worth deserves, yet disdains, its outward ornaments. Do not think Amy can love thee better in this glorious garb than she did when she gave her heart to him who wore the russet-brown cloak in the woods of Devon."

"And thou too," said the Earl, as gracefully and majestically he led his beautiful Countess towards the chair of state which was prepared for them both,—"thou too, my love, hast donned a dress which becomes thy rank, though it cannot improve thy beauty. And now, loveliest, your wish is gratified, and you have seen your vassal in such of his trim array as accords with riding vestments; for robes of state and coronets are only for princely halls."

"Well, then," said the Countess, "my gratified wish has, as usual, given rise to a new one."

"And what is it thou canst ask that I can deny?" said the fond husband.

"I wished to see my Earl visit this obscure and secret bower," said the Countess, "in all his princely array; and now, methinks, I long to sit in one of his princely halls, and see him enter dressed in sober russet, as when he won poor Amy Robsart's heart."

"That is a wish easily granted," said the Earl—"the sober russet shall be donned to-morrow, if you will."

"But shall I," said the lady, "go with you to one of your castles, to see how the richness of your dwelling will correspond with your peasant habit?"

"Why, Amy," said the Earl, looking around, "are not these apartments decorated with sufficient splendour? I gave the most unbounded order, and methinks it has been indifferently well obeyed—but if thou canst tell me aught which remains to be done, I will instantly give direction."

"Nay, my lord, now you mock me," replied the Countess; "the gaiety of this rich lodging exceeds my imagination as much as it does my desert. But shall not your wife, my love—at least one day soon—be surrounded with the honour which arises neither from the toils of the mechanic who decks her apartment, nor from the silks and jewels with which your generosity adorns her, but which is attached to her place among the matronage, as the avowed wife of England's noblest Earl?"

The Earl's brow was overcast.

"Amy," he said, "you speak of what you understand not. We that toil in courts are like those who climb a mountain of loose sand—we dare make no halt until some projecting rock affords us a secure footing and resting place—if we pause sooner, we slide down by our own weight, an object of universal derision. I stand high, but I stand not secure enough to follow my own inclinations. To declare my marriage were to be the artificer of my own ruin. But, believe me, I will reach a point, and that speedily, when I can do justice to thee and to myself. Meantime, poison not the bliss of the present moment by desiring that which cannot at present be. Let me rather know whether all here is managed to thy liking. How does Foster bear himself to you?—In all things respectful, I trust, else the fellow shall dearly rue it."

"Oh, I have nought to complain of," answered the lady, "so he discharges his task with fidelity to you; and his daughter Janet is the kindest and best companion of my solitude—her little air of precision sits so well upon her!"

"Is she indeed?" said the Earl; "she who gives you pleasure must not pass unrewarded.—Come hither, damsel."

"Janet," said the lady, "come hither to my lord."

Janet, who, as we already noticed, had discreetly retired to some distance, that her presence might be no check upon the private conversation of her lord and lady, now came forward, and as she made her reverential courtesy, the Earl could not help smiling at the contrast which the extreme simplicity of her dress and the prim demureness of her looks made with a very pretty countenance and a pair of black eyes, that laughed in spite of their mistress's desire to look grave.

"I am bound to you, pretty damsel," said the Earl, "for the contentment which your service hath given to this lady." As he said this, he took from his finger a ring of some price, and offered it to Janet Foster, adding, "Wear this for her sake and for mine."

"I am well pleased, my lord," answered Janet, demurely, "that my poor service hath gratified my lady, whom no one can draw nigh to without desiring to please; but we of the precious Master Holdforth's congregation seek not, like the gay daughters of this world, to twine gold around our fingers, or wear stones upon our necks, like the vain women of Tyre and of Sidon."

"Oh, what! you are a grave professor of the precise sisterhood, pretty Mistress Janet," said the Earl, "and I think your father is of the same congregation in sincerity. I like you both the better for it; for I have been prayed for, and wished well to, in your congregations. And you may the better afford the lack of ornament, Mistress Janet, because your fingers are slender, and your neck white. But here is what neither papist nor puritan, latitudinarian nor precisian, ever boggles or makes mouths at. E'en take it, my girl, and employ it as you list."

So saying, he put into her hand five broad gold pieces of Philip and Mary.

"I would not accept this gold either," said Janet, "but that I hope to find a use for it, which will bring a blessing on us all."

"Even please thyself, pretty Janet," said the Earl, "and I shall be well satisfied—And I prithee let them hasten the evening collation."

"I have bidden Master Varney and Master Foster to sup with us, my lord," said the Countess, as Janet retired to obey the Earl's commands; "has it your approbation?"

"What you do ever must have so, my sweet Amy," replied her husband; "and I am the better pleased thou hast done them this grace, because Richard Varney is my sworn man, and a close brother of my secret council; and for the present I must needs repose much trust in this Anthony Foster."

"I had a boon to beg of thee, and a secret to tell thee, my dear lord," said the Countess with a faltering accent.

"Let both be for to-morrow, my love," replied the Earl. "I see they open the folding-doors into the banqueting-parlour, and as I have ridden far and fast, a cup of wine will not be unacceptable."

So saying, he led his lovely wife into the next apartment, where Varney and Foster received them with the deepest reverences, which the first paid with the fashion of the court, and the second after that of the congregation. The Earl returned their salutation with the negligent courtesy of one long used to such homage; while the Countess repaid it with a punctilious solicitude, which showed it was not quite so familiar to her.

The banquet, at which the company seated themselves, corresponded in magnificence with the splendour of the apartment in which it was served up, but no domestic gave his attendance. Janet alone stood ready to wait upon the company; and, indeed, the board was so well supplied with all that could be desired, that little or no assistance was necessary. The Earl and his lady occupied the upper end of the table, and Varney and Foster sat beneath the salt, as was the custom with inferiors. The latter, overawed perhaps by society to which he was altogether unused, did not utter a single syllable during the repast; while Varney, with great tact and discernment, sustained just as much of the conversation, as, without the appearance of intrusion on his part, prevented it from languishing, and maintained the good humour of the Earl at the highest pitch. This man was indeed highly qualified by nature to discharge the part in which he found himself placed, being discreet and cautious on the one hand, and on the other, quick, keen-witted, and imaginative; so that even the Countess, prejudiced as she was against him on many accounts, felt and enjoyed his powers of conversation, and was more disposed than she had ever hitherto found herself, to join in the praises which the Earl lavished on his favourite. The hour of rest at length arrived; the Earl and Countess retired to their apartment; and all was silent in the castle for the rest of the night.

Early on the ensuing morning, Varney acted as the Earl's chamberlain, as well as his master of horse, though the latter was his proper office in that magnificent household, where knights and gentlemen of good descent were well contented to hold such menial situations, as nobles themselves held in that of the sovereign. The duties of each of these charges were familiar to Varney, who, sprung from an ancient but decayed family, was the Earl's page during his earlier and more obscure fortunes, and faithful to him in adversity, had afterwards contrived to render himself no less useful to him in his rapid and splendid advance to fortune; thus establishing in him an interest, resting both on present and past services, which rendered him an almost indispensable sharer of his confidence.

"Help me to do on a plainer riding suit, Varney," said the Earl, as he laid aside his morning-gown, flowered with silk, and lined with sables, "and put these chains and fetters there" (pointing to the collars of the various Orders which lay on the table) "into their place of security—my neck last night was well-nigh broke with the weight of them. I am half of the mind that they shall gall me no more. They are bonds which knaves have invented to fetter fools. How think'st thou, Varney?"

"Faith, my good lord," said his attendant, "I think fetters of gold are like no other fetters—they are ever the weightier the welcomer."

"For all that, Varney," replied his master, "I am well-nigh resolved they shall bind me to the court no longer. What can farther service and higher favour give me, beyond the high rank and large estate which I have already secured?—What brought my father to the block, but that he could not bound his wishes within right and reason?—Bear witness to me, Varney; I subdue my wishes of retirement, not because I am moved by the call of private ambition, but that I may preserve the position in which I may best serve my country at the hour of need.—Order our horses presently—I will wear, as formerly, one of the livery cloaks, and ride before the portmantle.—Thou shalt be master for the day, Varney—neglect nothing that can blind suspicion. We will to horse ere men are stirring. I will but take leave of my lady, and be ready. I impose a restraint on my own poor heart, and wound one yet more dear to me; but the patriot must subdue the husband."

Having said this in a melancholy but firm accent, he left the dressing apartment, bent on taking a hasty farewell of the lovely Countess, and scarce daring to trust himself in private with her, to hear requests again urged, which he found it difficult to parry, yet which his recent conversation with his master of horse had determined him not to grant.

He found her in a white cymar of silk lined with furs, her little feet unstockinged and hastily thrust into slippers, her unbraided hair escaping from under her midnight coif, with little array but her own loveliness, rather augmented than diminished by the grief which she felt at the approaching moment of separation.

"Now, God be with thee, my dearest and loveliest!" said the Earl, scarce tearing himself from her embrace, yet again returning to fold her again and again in his arms, and again bidding farewell, and again returning to kiss and bid adieu once more.

"The sun is on the verge of the blue horizon—I dare not stay. Ere this I should have been ten miles from hence."

Such were the words, with which at length he strove to cut short their parting interview.

"You will not grant my request, then?" said the Countess. "Ah, false knight! did ever lady, with bare foot in slipper, seek boon of a brave knight, yet return with denial?"

"Any thing, Amy, any thing thou canst ask I will grant," answered the Earl—"always excepting," he said, "that which might ruin us both."

"Nay," said the Countess, "I urge not my wish to be acknowledged in the character which would make me the envy of England—as the wife that is, of my brave and noble lord, the first as the most fondly beloved of English nobles.—Let me but share the secret with my dear father!—Let me but end his misery on my unworthy account—they say he is ill, the good old kind-hearted man."

"*They* say?" asked the Earl, hastily; "who says? Did not Varney convey to Sir Hugh all we dare at present tell him concerning your happiness and welfare? Be contented, Amy—thou canst not now have communication with thy father or his house. Were it not a deep course of policy to commit no secret unnecessarily to the custody of more than must needs be, it were sufficient reason for secrecy, that yonder Cornish man, yonder Trevanion, or Tressilian, or whatever his name is, haunts the old knight's house, and must necessarily know whatever is communicated there."

"My lord," answered the Countess, "I do not think it so. My father has been long noted a worthy and honourable man; and for Tressilian, if we can pardon ourselves the ill we have wrought him, I will wager the coronet I am to share with you one day, that he is incapable of returning injury for injury."

"I will not trust him, however, Amy," said her husband; "by my honour, I will not trust him—I would rather the foul fiend intermingle in our secret than this Tressilian!"

"And why, my lord?" said the Countess, though she shuddered slightly at the tone of determination in which he spoke; "let me but know why you think thus hardly of Tressilian?"

"Madam," replied the Earl, "my will ought to be a sufficient reason—If you desire more, consider how this Tressilian is leagued, and with whom—He stands high in the opinion of this Radcliffe, this Sussex, against whom I am barely able to maintain my ground in the opinion of our suspicious mistress; and if he had me at such advantage, Amy, as to become acquainted with the tale of our marriage, before Elizabeth were fitly prepared, I were an outcast from her grace for ever—a bankrupt at once in favour and in fortune, perhaps, for she hath in her touch of her father Henry,—a victim, and it may be a bloody one, to her offended and jealous resentment."

"But why, my lord," again urged his lady, "should you deem thus injuriously of a man of whom you know so little? What you do know of Tressilian is through me, and it is I who assure you that in no circumstances will he betray your secret. If I did him wrong in your behalf, my lord, I am now the more concerned you should do him justice.—You are offended at my speaking of him, what would you say had I actually myself seen him?"

"If you had," replied the Earl, "you would do well to keep that interview as secret as that which is spoken in a confessional. I seek no one's ruin; but he who thrusts himself on my secret privacy, were better look well to his future walk. The bear[1] brooks no one to cross his awful path."

"Awful, indeed!" said the Countess, turning very pale.

"You are ill, my love," said the Earl, supporting her in his arms; "stretch yourself on your couch again; it is but an early day for you to leave it.—Have you aught else, involving less than my fame, my fortune, and my life, to ask of me?"

"Nothing, my lord and love," answered the Countess, faintly; "something there was that I would have told you, but your anger has driven it from my recollection."

"Reserve it till our next meeting, my love," said the Earl, fondly, and again embracing her; "and barring only those requests which I cannot and dare not grant, thy wish must be more than England and all its dependencies can fulfil, if it is not gratified to the letter."

Thus saying, he at length took farewell.

While his stately form vanished under the dark archway which led out of the quadrangle, Varney muttered, "There goes fine policy—the servant before the master!" then as he disappeared, seized the moment to speak a word with Foster. "Thou look'st dark on me, Anthony," he said, "as if I had deprived thee of a parting nod of my lord; but I have moved him to leave thee a better remembrance for thy faithful service. See here! a purse of as good gold as ever chinked under a miser's thumb and forefinger. Ay, count them, lad," said he, as Foster received the gold with a grim smile, "and add to them the goodly remembrance he gave last night to Janet."

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[1] The Leicester cognisance was the ancient device adopted by his father, when Earl of Warwick, the bear and ragged staff.

"How's this? how's this?" said Anthony Foster, hastily; "gave he gold to Janet?"

"Ay, man, wherefore not?—does not her service to his fair lady require guerdon?"

"She shall have none on't," said Foster; "she shall return it. I know his dotage on one face is as brief as it is deep. His affections are as fickle as the moon."

"Why, Foster, thou art mad—thou dost not hope for such good fortune as that my lord should cast an eye on Janet?—Who, in the fiend's name, would listen to the thrush when the nightingale is singing?"

"Thrush or nightingale, all is one to the fowler; and, Master Varney, you can sound the quailpipe most daintily to wile wantons into his nets. I desire no such devil's preferment for Janet as you have brought many a poor maiden to—Dost thou laugh?—I will keep one limb of my family, at least, from Satan's clutches, that thou mayest rely on—She shall restore the gold."

"Ay, or give it to thy keeping, Tony, which will serve as well," answered Varney; "but I have that to say which is more serious.—Say nothing of this Tressilian's visit—not a word until I give thee notice."

"And wherefore, I pray you?" asked Foster suspiciously.

"Dull beast!" replied Varney; "in my lord's present humour it were the ready way to confirm him in his resolution of retirement, should he know that his lady was haunted with such a spectre in his absence. He would be for playing the dragon himself over his golden fruit, and then, Tony, thy occupation is ended. A word to the wise—Farewell—I must follow him."

He turned his horse, struck him with the spurs, and rode off under the archway in pursuit of his lord, whom he found waiting for him at the postern-gate of the park.

"You waste time, Varney," said the Earl; "and it presses. I must be at Woodstock before I can safely lay aside my disguise; and till then, I journey in some peril."

"It is but two hours' brisk riding, my lord," said Varney; "for me, I only stopped to enforce your commands of care and secrecy on yonder Foster, and to inquire about the abode of the gentleman whom I would promote to your lordship's train, in the room of Trevors."

"Is he fit for the meridian of the antechamber, think'st thou?" said the Earl.

"He promises well, my lord," replied Varney; "but if your lordship were pleased to ride on, I could go back to Cumnor, and bring him to your lordship at Woodstock before you are out of bed."

"Why, I am asleep there, thou knowest, at this moment," said the Earl: "and I pray you not to spare horse-flesh, that you may be with me at my levee."

So saying, he gave his horse the spur, and proceeded on his journey, while Varney rode back to Cumnor by the public road, avoiding the park. The latter alighted at the door of the Bonny Black Bear, and desired to speak with Master Michael Lambourne. That respectable character was not long of appearing before his new patron, but it was with downcast looks.

"Thou hast lost the scent," said Varney, "of thy comrade Tressilian.—I know it by thy hang-dog visage. Is this thy alacrity, thou impudent knave?"

"Cogswounds!" said Lambourne, "there was never a trail so finely hunted. I saw him to earth at mine uncle's here—stuck to him like bees' wax—saw him at supper—watched him to his chamber, and presto—he is gone next morning, the very hostler knows not where!"

"This sounds like practice upon me, sir," replied Varney; "and if it proves so, by my soul you shall repent it!"

"Sir, the best hound will be sometimes at fault," answered Lambourne; "how should it serve me that this fellow should have thus evanished? You may ask mine host, Giles Gosling—ask the tapster and hostler—ask Cicely, and the whole household, how I kept eyes on Tressilian while he was on foot.—On my soul, I could not be expected to watch him like a sick-nurse, when I had seen him fairly a-bed in his chamber. That will be allowed me surely."

Varney did, in fact, make some inquiry among the household, which confirmed the truth of Lambourne's statement. Tressilian, it was unanimously agreed, had departed suddenly and unexpectedly, betwixt night and morning.

"But I will wrong no one," said mine host; "he left on the table in his lodging the full value of his reckoning, with some allowance to the servants of the house, which was the less necessary, that he saddled his own gelding, as it seems, without the hostler's assistance."

Thus satisfied of the rectitude of Lambourne's conduct, Varney began to talk to him upon his future prospects, and the mode in which he meant to bestow himself, intimating that he understood from Foster he was not disinclined to enter into the household of a nobleman.

"Thou mayest do me, and my lord, and thyself good service," said Varney. "But observe, I know the world—and answer me truly, canst thou be faithful?"

"Did you not know the world," answered Lambourne, "it were my duty to say ay, without farther circumstance, and to swear to it with life and honour, and so forth. But as it seems to me that your worship is one who desires rather honest truth than politic falsehood—I reply to you, that I can be faithful to the gallows foot; ay, to the loop that dangles from it, if I am well used and well recompensed;—not otherwise."

"Well," replied Varney, "if thou hast no hypocrisy, hast thou not a nag here in the stable?"

"Ay, sir," said Lambourne, "that shall take hedge and ditch with my Lord Duke's best hunters. When I made a little mistake on Shooter's Hill, and stopped an ancient grazier whose pouches were better lined than his brain-pan, the bonny bay nag carried me sheer off in spite of the whole hue and cry."

"Saddle him then, instantly, and attend me," said Varney. "Leave thy clothes and baggage under charge of mine host, and I will conduct thee to a service, in which, if thou do not better thyself, the fault shall not be fortune's, but thine own."

"Does my nephew go with you, so please you?" said Gosling.

"Ay, such is his purpose," answered Richard Varney.

"You are right—fully right," replied mine host—"you are, I say, fully right, my kinsman. Thou hast got a gay horse, see thou light not unaware upon a halter—or, if thou wilt needs be made immortal by means of a rope, which thy purpose of following this gentleman renders not unlikely, I charge thee to find a gallows as far from Cumnor as thou conveniently mayest; and so I commend you to your saddle."

The master of the horse and his new retainer mounted accordingly, leaving the landlord to conclude his ill-omened farewell, to himself and at leisure; and set off together at a rapid pace, which prevented conversation until the ascent of a steep sandy hill permitted them to resume it.

"You are contented then," said Varney to his companion, "to take court-service?"

"That jumps all with my humour," replied Michael Lambourne; "and it only remains that you tell me my master's name."

"My name is Master Richard Varney," answered his companion.

"But I mean," said Lambourne, "the name of the noble lord to whose service you are to prefer me."

"Thou art a shrewd knave, I see," replied Varney. "Mark me—I do indeed propose to introduce thee into a nobleman's household; but it is upon my person thou wilt chiefly wait, and upon my countenance that thou wilt depend. I am his master of horse—Thou wilt soon know his name—it is one that shakes the council and wields the state."

"By this light, a brave spell to conjure with," said Lambourne, "if a man would discover hidden treasures!"

"Used with discretion, it may prove so," replied Varney; "but mark—if thou conjure with it at thine own hand, it may raise a devil who will tear thee in fragments."

"Enough said," replied Lambourne; "I will not exceed my limits."

The travellers then resumed the rapid rate of travelling which their discourse had interrupted, and soon arrived at the Royal Park of Woodstock. It was, in Elizabeth's time, an ancient mansion in bad repair, which had long ceased to be honoured with the royal residence, to the great impoverishment of the adjacent village. The inhabitants, however, had made several petitions to the Queen to have the favour of the sovereign's countenance occasionally bestowed upon them; and upon this very business, ostensibly at least, was the noble lord, whom we have already introduced to our readers, a visitor at Woodstock.

Varney and Lambourne galloped without ceremony into the courtyard of the ancient and dilapidated mansion, which presented on that morning a scene of bustle which it had not exhibited for two reigns. Officers of the Earl's household, liverymen and retainers, went and came with all the insolent fracas which attaches to their profession. Several of the inhabitants of the village, in anxious hope of a favourable result from this unwonted visit, loitered about the courtyard, and awaited the great man's coming forth. Meanwhile, Varney, closely followed by his new dependent, made his way to the hall, where men of more note and consequence than those left in the courtyard awaited the appearance of the Earl, who as yet kept his chamber. All paid court to Varney, with more or less deference, as suited their own rank, or the urgency of the business which brought them to his lord's levee. Varney, therefore, bowed to the company, and took leave to enter his lord's apartment.

There was a murmur of expectation which lasted a few minutes, and was at length hushed by the opening of the folding-doors at the upper end of the apartment, through which the Earl made his entrance, marshalled by his chamberlain and the steward of his family, and followed by Richard Varney. In his noble mien and princely features, men read nothing of that insolence which was practised by his dependants. His courtesies were, indeed, measured by the rank of those to whom they were addressed, but even the meanest person present had a share of his gracious notice. The inquiries which he made respecting the condition of the manor, of the Queen's rights there, and of the advantages and disadvantages which might attend her occasional residence at the royal seat of Woodstock, seemed to show that he had most earnestly investigated the matter of the petition of the inhabitants, and with a desire to forward the interest of the place.

The Earl and his retinue took horse soon after, to return to court, accompanied by the shouts of the inhabitants of Woodstock, who made the old oaks ring with re-echoing, "Long live Queen Elizabeth, and the noble Earl of Leicester!" The urbanity and courtesy of the Earl even threw a gleam of popularity over his attendants, as their haughty deportment had formerly obscured that of their master; and men shouted, "Long life to the Earl, and to his gallant followers!" as Varney and Lambourne, each in his rank, rode proudly through the streets of Woodstock.

VII

It becomes necessary to return to the detail of those circumstances which accompanied, and indeed occasioned, the sudden disappearance of Tressilian from the sign of the Black Bear at Cumnor. It will be recollected that this gentleman, after his rencounter with Varney, had returned to Giles Gosling's caravansary, where he shut himself up in his own chamber, demanded pen, ink, and paper, and announced his purpose to remain private for the day: in the evening he appeared again in the public room. The hour of supper arrived, and was followed by that of repose, when Tressilian, like others, retired to his sleeping apartment.

He had not been in bed long when the train of sad reveries, which supplied the place of rest in his disturbed mind, was suddenly interrupted by the jar of a door on its hinges, and a light was seen to glimmer in the apartment. Tressilian, who was as brave as steel, sprang from his bed at this alarm, and had laid hand upon his sword, when he was prevented from drawing it by a voice which said, "Be not too rash with your rapier, Master Tressilian—It is I, your host, Giles Gosling."

At the same time, unshrouding the dark lantern, which had hitherto only emitted an indistinct glimmer, the goodly aspect and figure of the landlord of the Black Bear was visibly presented to his astonished guest.

"What mummery is this, mine host?" said Tressilian; "have you supped as jollily as last night, and so mistaken your chamber? or is midnight a time for masquerading it in your guest's lodging?"

"Master Tressilian," replied mine host, "I know my place and my time as well as e'er a merry landlord in England. But here has been my hang-dog kinsman watching you as close as ever cat watched a mouse; and Anthony Foster is a dangerous man, defended by strong court patronage, which hath borne him out in matters of very deep concernment. And then, my kinsman—why, I have told you what he is; and if these two old cronies have made up their old acquaintance, I would not, my worshipful guest, that it should be at thy cost. I promise you, Mike Lambourne has been making very particular inquiries at mine hostler, when and which way you ride. Now, I would have you think, whether you may not have done or said something for which you may be waylaid, and taken at disadvantage."

"Thou art an honest man, mine host," said Tressilian, after a moment's consideration, "and I will deal frankly with thee. If these men's malice is directed against me—as I deny not but it may—it is because they are the agents of a more powerful villain than themselves."

"You mean Master Richard Varney, do you not?" said the landlord; "he was at Cumnor Place yesterday, and came not thither so private but what he was espied by one who told me."

"I mean the same, mine host."

"Then, for God's sake, worshipful Master Tressilian," said honest Gosling, "look well to yourself. This Varney is the protector and patron of Anthony Foster, who holds under him, and by his favour, some lease of yonder mansion and the park. Varney got a large grant of the lands of the Abbacy of Abingdon, and Cumnor Place amongst others, from his master, the Earl of Leicester. Men say he can do everything with him, though I hold the Earl too good a nobleman to employ him as some men talk of.—And then the Earl can do anything (that is, anything right or fitting) with the Queen, God bless her, so you see what an enemy you have made to yourself."

"Well—it is done, and I cannot help it," answered Tressilian.

"Uds precious, but it must be helped in some manner," said the host. "Richard Varney—why, what between his influence with my lord, and his pretending to so many old and vexatious claims in right of the Abbot here, men fear almost to mention his name, much more to set themselves against his practices. You may judge by our discourses the last night. Men said their pleasure of Tony Foster, but not a word of Richard Varney, though all men judge him to be at the bottom of yonder mystery about the pretty wench. But perhaps you know more of that matter than I do, for women, though they wear not swords, are occasion for many a blade's exchanging a sheath of neat's leather for one of flesh and blood."

"I do indeed know more of that poor unfortunate lady than thou dost, my friendly host; and so bankrupt am I, at this moment, of friends and advice, that I will willingly make a counsellor of thee, and tell thee the whole history, the rather that I have a favour to ask when my tale is ended. The exquisite beauty of Mistress Amy Robsart, as she grew up from childhood to woman, could not escape one whom circumstances obliged to be so constantly in her company—I loved her, in short, my host, and her father saw it."

"And crossed your true loves, no doubt?" said mine host; "it is the way in all such cases; and I judge it must have been so in your instance, from the heavy sigh you uttered even now."

"The case was different, mine host. My suit was highly approved by the generous Sir Hugh Robsart—it was his daughter who was cold to my passion."

"She was the more dangerous enemy of the two," said the innkeeper. "I fear your suit proved a cold one."

"She yielded me her esteem," said Tressilian, "and seemed not unwilling that I should hope it might ripen into a warmer passion. There was a contract of future marriage executed betwixt us upon her father's intercession; but to comply with her anxious request, the execution was deferred for a twelvemonth. During this period, Richard Varney appeared in the country, and, availing himself of some distant family connection with Sir Hugh Robsart, spent much of his time in his company, until, at length, he almost lived in the family."

"That could bode no good to the place he honoured with his residence," said Gosling.

"No, by the rood!" replied Tressilian. "Misunderstanding and misery followed his presence, yet so strangely, that I am at this moment at a loss to trace the gradations of their encroachment upon a family, which had, till then, been so happy. For a time Amy Robsart received the attentions of this man Varney with the indifference attached to common courtesies; then followed a period in which she seemed to regard him with dislike, and even with disgust; and then an extraordinary species of connection appeared to grow up betwixt them. Varney dropped those airs of pretension and gallantry which had marked his former approaches; and Amy, on the other hand, seemed to renounce the ill-disguised disgust with which she had regarded them. They seemed to have more of privacy and confidence together, than I fully liked; and I suspected that they met in private, where there was less restraint than in our presence. Many circumstances, which I noticed but little at the time—for I deemed her heart as open as her angelic countenance—have since arisen on my memory, to convince me of their private understanding. But I need not detail them—the fact speaks for itself. She vanished from her father's house—Varney disappeared at the same time—and this very day I have seen her in the character of his paramour, living in the house of his sordid dependant Foster, and visited by him, muffled, and by a secret entrance."

"And what is now your purpose, worthy sir?—excuse my freedom in asking the question so broadly."

"I will appeal to the Earl of Leicester," said Tressilian, "against the infamy of his favourite.—He courts the severe and strict sect of puritans—He dare not, for the sake of his own character, refuse my appeal, even although he were destitute of the principles of honour and nobleness, with which fame invests him. Or I will appeal to the Queen herself."

"Should Leicester," said the landlord, "be disposed to protect his dependant (as indeed he is said to be very confidential with Varney), the appeal to the Queen may bring them both to reason. Her Majesty is strict in such matters, and (if it be not treason to speak it) will rather, it is said, pardon a dozen courtiers for falling in love with herself, than one for giving preference to another woman. Coragio, then, my brave guest! for if thou layest a petition from Sir Hugh at the foot of the throne, bucklered by the story of thine own wrongs, the favourite earl dared as soon leap into the Thames at the fullest and deepest, as offer to protect Varney in a cause of this nature. But to do this with any chance of success, you must go formally to work; and, without staying here to tilt with the master of horse to a privy councillor, and expose yourself to the dagger of his camerades, you should hie you to Devonshire, get a petition drawn up for Sir Hugh Robsart, and make as many friends as you can to forward your interest at court."

"You have spoken well, mine host," said Tressilian. "And I will profit by your advice, and leave you to-morrow early."

"Nay, leave me to-night, sir, before to-morrow comes," said the landlord. "I never prayed for a guest's arrival more eagerly than I do to have you safely gone. My kinsman's destiny is most like to be hanged for something, but I would not that the cause were the murder of an honoured guest of mine. I pity you, Master Tressilian, but I see not how I can aid you in the matter."

"Only thus far, mine host," replied Tressilian—"Keep a watch on the motions of those at the Place, which thou canst easily learn without suspicion, as all men's news fly to the ale-bench; and be pleased to communicate the tidings in writing to such person, and to no other, who shall bring you this ring as a special token—look at it—it is of value, and I will freely bestow it on you."

"Nay, sir," said the landlord, "I desire no recompense—but it seems an unadvised course in me, being in a public line, to connect myself in a matter of this dark and perilous nature. I have no interest in it."

"You, and every father in the land who would have his daughter released from the snares of shame, and sin, and misery, have an interest deeper than aught concerning earth only could create."

"Well, sir," said the host, "these are brave words; and I do pity from my soul the frank-hearted old gentleman who has minished his estate in good housekeeping for the honour of his country, and now has his daughter, who should be the stay of his age, and so forth, whisked up by such a kite as this Varney. And though your part in the matter is somewhat of the wildest, yet I will e'en be a madcap for company, and help you in your honest attempt to get back the good man's child, so far as being your faithful intelligencer can serve. And as I shall be true to you, I pray you to be trusty to me, and keep my secret; for it were bad for the custom of the Black Bear should it be said the bear-warder interfered in such matters. Varney has interest enough with the justices to dismount my noble emblem from the post on which he swings so gallantly, to call in my licence, and ruin me from garret to cellar."

"Do not doubt my secrecy, mine host," said Tressilian; "I will retain, besides, the deepest sense of thy service, and of the risk thou dost run—remember the ring is my sure token.—And now, farewell—for it was thy wise advice that I should tarry here as short a time as may be."

"Follow me, then, Sir Guest," said the landlord, "and tread as gently as if eggs were under your foot instead of deal boards.—No one must know when or how you departed."

By the aid of his dark lantern he conducted Tressilian, as soon as he had made himself ready for his journey, through a long intricacy of passages, which opened to an outer court, and from thence to a remote stable, where he had already placed his guest's horse. He then aided him to fasten on the saddle the small portmantle which contained his necessaries, opened a postern-door, and with a hearty shake of the hand, and a reiteration of his promise to attend to what went on at Cumnor Place, he dismissed his guest to his solitary journey.

VIII

As it was deemed proper by the traveller himself, as well as by Giles Gosling, that Tressilian should avoid being seen in the neighbourhood of Cumnor by those whom accident might make early risers, the landlord had given him a route, consisting of various byways and lanes, which he was to follow in succession, and which, all the turns and short cuts duly observed, was to conduct him to the public road to Marlborough.

But, like counsel of every other kind, this species of direction is much more easily given than followed; and what betwixt the intricacy of the way, the darkness of the night, Tressilian's ignorance of the country, and the sad and perplexing thoughts with which he had to contend, his journey proceeded so slowly, that morning found him only in the vale of Whitehorse, memorable for the defeat of the Danes in former days, with his horse deprived of a forefoot shoe, an accident which threatened to put a stop to his journey, by laming the animal. The residence of a smith was his first object of inquiry, in which he received little satisfaction from the dullness or sullenness of one or two peasants, early bound for their labour, who gave brief and indifferent answers to his questions on the subject. Anxious, at length, that the partner of his journey should suffer as little as possible from the unfortunate accident, Tressilian dismounted, and led his horse in the direction of a little hamlet, where he hoped either to find or hear tidings of such an artificer as he now wanted. Through a deep and muddy lane, he at length waded on to the place, which proved only an assemblage of five or six miserable huts, about the doors of which, one or two persons, whose appearance seemed as rude as that of their dwellings, were beginning the toils of the day. One cottage, however, seemed of rather superior aspect, and the old dame, who was sweeping her threshold, appeared something less rude than her neighbours. To her Tressilian addressed the oft-repeated question, whether there was a smith in this neighbourhood, or any place where he could refresh his horse. The dame looked him in the face with a peculiar expression, as she replied, "Smith ! ay, truly is there a smith—what wouldst ha' wi' un, mon ?"

"To shoe my horse, good dame," answered Tressilian; "you may see that he has thrown a forefoot shoe."

"Master Holiday!" exclaimed the dame, without returning any direct answer—"Master Herasmus Holiday, come and speak to mon, and please you."

"*Favete linguis*," answered a voice from within; "I cannot now come forth, Gammer Sludge, being in the very sweetest bit of my morning studies."

"Nay, but, good now, Master Holiday, come ye out, do ye—Here's a mon would to Wayland Smith, and I care not to show him way to devil—his horse hath cast a shoe."

"*Quid mihi cum caballo?*" replied the man of learning; "I think there is but one wise man in the hundred, and they cannot shoe a horse without him!"

"A' takes no money for a's work," said the dame, who stood by, enraptured as it were with the fine words and learned apophthegms which glided so fluently from her erudite inmate, Master Holiday. But this interruption pleased not the Magister, more than that of the traveller.

"Peace," said he, "Gammer Sludge; know your place, if it be your will. *Sufflamina*, Gammer Sludge, and allow me to expound this matter to our worshipful guest.—Sir," said he, addressing Tressilian, "this old woman speaks true, though in her own rude style; for certainly this *faber ferrarius*, or blacksmith, takes money of no one."

"And that is a sure sign he deals with Satan," said Dame Sludge; "since no good Christian would ever refuse the wages of his labour."

"The old woman hath touched it again," said the pedagogue; "*rem acu tetigit*—she hath pricked it with her needle's point.—But assuredly there is little wisdom in taking counsel or receiving aid from one, who is but too plainly in league with the author of evil."

"I must take my chance of that, good Master Holiday," said Tressilian, rising; "and pray you to show me this man's residence, that I may have the means of proceeding on my journey."

"Ay, ay, do ye show him, Master Herasmus," said the old dame, who was, perhaps, desirous to get her house freed of her guest; "a' must needs go when the devil drives."

"*Do manus*," said the Magister, "I submit—taking the world to witness, that I have possessed this honourable gentleman with the full injustice which he has done and shall do to his own soul, if he becomes thus a trinketer with Satan. Neither will I go forth with our guest myself, but rather send my pupil.—*Ricarde! adsis, nebulo*."

"Under your favour, not so," answered the old woman; "you may peril your own soul, if you list, but my son shall budge on no such errand; and I wonder at you, Dominie Doctor, to propose such a piece of service for little Dickie."

"Nay, my good Gammer Sludge," answered the preceptor, "Ricardus shall go but to the top of the hill, and indicate with his digit to the stranger the dwelling of Wayland Smith. —*Ergo, heus Ricarde! adsis, quæso, mi didascule.*"

The pupil, thus affectionately invoked, at length came stumbling into the room; a queer, shambling, ill-made urchin, who, by his stunted growth, seemed about twelve or thirteen years old, though he was probably, in reality, a year or two older, with a carroty pate in huge disorder, a freckled sunburnt visage, with a snub nose, a long chin and two peery grey eyes, which had a droll obliquity of vision, approaching to a squint, though perhaps not a decided one. It was impossible to look at the little man without some disposition to laugh, especially when Gammer Sludge, seizing upon and kissing him, in spite of his struggling and kicking in reply to her caresses, termed him her own precious pearl of beauty.

"*Ricarde*," said the preceptor, "you must forthwith (which is *profecto*) set forth so far as the top of the hill, and show this man of worship Wayland Smith's workshop."

"A proper errand of a morning," said the boy, in better language than Tressilian expected; "and who knows but the devil may fly away with me before I come back?"

"My good boy," said Tressilian, who saw, from a grotesque sneer on Dickie's face, that he was more likely to act upon his own bottom than by the instructions of his elders, "I will give thee a silver groat, my pretty fellow, if you will but guide me to this man's forge."

The boy gave him a knowing side-look, which seemed to promise acquiescence, while at the same time he exclaimed, "I be your guide to Wayland Smith's! Why, man, did I not say that the devil might fly off with me, just as the kite there" (looking to the window) "is flying off with one of grandam's chicks?"

"The kite! the kite!" exclaimed the old woman in return, and forgetting all other matters in her alarm, hastened to the rescue of her chicken as fast as her old legs could carry her.

"Now for it," said the urchin to Tressilian; "snatch your beaver, get out your horse, and have at the silver groat you spoke of."

"Nay, but tarry, tarry," said the preceptor, "*Sufflamina, Ricarde.*"

"Tarry yourself," said Dickie, "and think what answer you are to make to granny for sending me post to the devil."

The teacher, aware of the responsibility he was incurring, bustled up in great haste to lay hold of the urchin, and to prevent his departure; but Dickie slipped through his fingers, bolted from the cottage, and sped him to the top of a neighbouring rising ground, making signs to his new acquaintance, Tressilian, to follow him.

The traveller lost no time in joining his elvish guide, after half-forcing on the poor deserted teacher a recompense for the entertainment he had received, which partly allayed the terror he had for facing the return of the old lady of the mansion.

"Are we far from the dwelling of this smith, my pretty lad?" said Tressilian to his young guide.

"How is it you call me?" said the boy, looking askew at him with his sharp grey eyes.

"I call you my pretty lad—is there any offence in that, my boy?"

"No—but were you with my grandam and Dominic Holiday, you might sing chorus to the old song of

'We three
Tom-fools be.'"

"And why so, my little man?" said Tressilian.

"Because," answered the ugly urchin, "you are the only three ever called me pretty lad—Now my grandam does it because she is parcel blind by age, and whole blind by kindred—and my master, the poor Dominie, does it to curry favour, and have the fullest platter of furmity, and the warmest seat by the fire. But though I am as ugly as sin, I would not have you think me an ass, especially as I may have a boon to ask of you one day."

"And what is that, my lad, whom I must not call pretty?" replied Tressilian.

"Oh, if I were to ask it just now," said the boy, "you would deny it me—but I will wait till we meet at court."

"At court, Richard! are you bound for Court?" said Tressilian.

"Ay, ay, that's just like the rest of them," replied the boy; "I warrant me you think, what should such an ill-favoured, scrambling urchin do at court? But let Richard Sludge alone; I have not been cock of the roost here for nothing. I will make sharp wit mend foul feature."

"But what will your grandam say, and your tutor, Dominie Holiday?"

"E'en what they like," replied Dickie; "the one has her chickens to reckon, and the other has his boy's to whip." I would have given them the candle to hold long since, and shown this trumpery hamlet a fair pair of heels, but the Dominie promises I should go with him to bear share in the next pageant he is to set forth, and they say there are to be great revels shortly."

"And whereabouts are they to be held, my little friend?" said Tressilian.

"Oh, at some castle far in the north," answered his guide—"a world's breadth from Berkshire. But our old Dominie holds that they cannot go forward without him; and it may be he is right, for he has put in order many a fair pageant. He is not half the fool you would take him for; when he gets to work he understands; and so he can spout verses like a play-actor, when, God wot, if you set him to steal a goose's egg, he would be drubbed by the gander."

"And you are to play a part in his next show?" said Tressilian, somewhat interested by the boy's boldness of conversation and shrewd estimate of character.

"In faith," said Richard Sludge, in answer, "he hath so promised me; and if he break his word, it will be the worse for him; for let me take the bit between my teeth, and turn my head down hill, and I will shake him off with a fall that may harm his bones—And I should not like much to hurt him neither," said he, "for the tiresome old fool has painfully laboured to teach me all he could.—But enough of that—here are we at Wayland Smith's forge-door."

"You jest, my little friend," said Tressilian; "here is nothing but a bare moor, and that ring of stones, with a great one in the midst, like a Cornish barrow."

"Ay, and that great flat stone in the midst, which lies across the top of these uprights," said the boy, "is Wayland Smith's counter, that you must tell down your money upon."

"What do you mean by such folly?" said the traveller, beginning to be angry with the boy, and vexed with himself for having trusted such a hare-brained guide.

"Why," said Dickie, with a grin, "you must tie your horse to that upright stone that has the ring in't, and then you must whistle three times, and lay me down your silver groat on that other flat stone, walk out of the circle, sit down on the west side of that little thicket of bushes, and take heed you look neither to right nor to left for ten minutes, or so long as you shall hear the hammer clink, and whenever it ceases, say your prayers for the space you could tell a hundred,—or count over a hundred, which will do as well,—and then come into the circle; you will find your money gone and your horse shod."

Tressilian, musing what the upshot of this mummery was to be, yet satisfied there was to be some serious result, by the confidence with which the boy had put himself in his power, suffered himself to be conducted to that side of the little thicket of gorse and brushwood, which was farthest from the circle of stones, and there sat down: and as it occurred to him that, after all, this might be a trick for stealing his horse, he kept his hand on the boy's collar, determined to make him hostage for its safety.

"Now, hush and listen," said Dickie, in a low whisper; "you will soon hear the tack of a hammer that was never forged of earthly iron, for the stone it was made of was shot from the moon." And in effect Tressilian did immediately hear the light stroke of a hammer, as when a farrier is at work. The singularity of such a sound, in so very lonely a place, made him involuntarily start; but looking at the boy, and discovering, by the arch-malicious expression of his countenance, that the urchin saw and enjoyed his slight tremor, he became convinced that the whole was a concerted stratagem, and determined to know by whom, or for what purpose, the trick was played off.

Accordingly, he remained perfectly quiet all the time that the hammer continued to sound, being about the space usually employed in fixing a horse-shoe. But the instant the sound ceased, Tressilian, instead of interposing the space of time which his guide had requested, started up with his sword in his hand, ran round the thicket and confronted a man in a farrier's leathern apron, but otherwise fantastically attired in a bear-skin dressed with the fur on, and a cap of the same, which almost hid the sooty and begrimed features of the wearer—"Come back, come back!" cried the boy to Tressilian, "or you will be torn to pieces—no man lives that looks on him."—In fact, the invisible smith (now fully visible) heaved up his hammer, and showed symptoms of doing battle.

But when the boy observed that neither his own entreaties nor the menaces of the farrier appeared to change Tressillian's purpose, but that, on the contrary, he confronted the hammer with his drawn sword, he exclaimed to the smith, in turn, "Wayland, touch him not, or you will come by the worse!—the gentleman is a true gentleman, and a bold."

"So thou hast betrayed me, Flibbertigibbet?" said the smith; "it shall be the worse for thee!"

"Be who thou wilt," said Tressilian, "thou art in no danger from me, so thou tell me the meaning of this practice, and why thou drivest thy trade in this mysterious fashion."

The smith, however, turning to Tressilian, exclaimed, in a threatening tone, "Who questions the Keeper of the Crystal

Castle of Light, the Lord of the Green Lion, the Rider of the Red Dragon?—Hence!—avoid thee, ere I summon Talpack with his fiery lance, to quell, crush, and consume!" These words he uttered with violent gesticulation, mouthing, and flourishing his hammer.

"Peace, thou vile cozener, with thy gipsy cant!" replied Tressilian, scornfully, "and follow me to the next magistrate, or I will cut thee over the pate."

"If you are so determined, sir," said the smith, "I cannot help myself save by force, which I were unwilling to use towards you, Master Tressilian; not that I fear your weapon, but because I know you to be a worthy, kind, and well-accomplished gentleman, who would rather help than harm a poor man that is in a strait."

"Well said, Wayland," said the boy, who had anxiously awaited the issue of their conference. "But let us to thy den, man, for it is ill for thy health to stand here talking in the open air."

"Thou art right, Hobgoblin," replied the smith; and going to the little thicket of gorse on the side nearest to the circle, and opposite to that at which his customer had so lately couched, he discovered a trap-door curiously covered with bushes, raised it, and, descending into the earth, vanished from their eyes. Notwithstanding Tressilian's curiosity, he had some hesitation at following the fellow into what might be a den of robbers, especially when he heard the smith's voice, issuing from the bowels of the earth, call out, "Flibbertigibbet, do you come last, and be sure to fasten the trap!"

"Have you seen enough of Wayland Smith now?" whispered the urchin to Tressilian, with an arch sneer, as if marking his companion's uncertainty.

"Not yet," said Tressilian, firmly; and shaking off his momentary irresolution, he descended into the narrow staircase, to which the entrance led, and was followed by Dickie Sludge, who made fast the trap-door behind him, and thus excluded every glimmer of daylight. The descent, however, was only a few steps, and led to a level passage of a few yards' length, at the end of which appeared the reflection of a lurid and red light. Arrived at this point, with his drawn sword in his hand, Tressilian found that a turn to the left admitted him and Hobgoblin, who followed closely, into a small square vault, containing a smith's forge, glowing with charcoal, the vapour of which filled the apartment with an oppressive smell, which would have been altogether suffocating, but that by some concealed vent the smithy communicated with the upper air. The light afforded by the red fuel, and by a lamp suspended in an iron chain, served to show that, besides an anvil, bellows, tongs, hammers, a quantity of ready-made horse-shoes, and other articles proper to the profession of a farrier, there were also stoves, alembics, crucibles, retorts, and other instruments of alchemy. The grotesque figure of the smith, and the ugly but whimsical features of the boy, seen by the gloomy and imperfect light of the charcoal fire and the dying lamp, accorded very well with all this mystical apparatus, and in that age of superstition would have made some impression on the courage of most men.

But nature had endowed Tressilian with firm nerves, and his education, originally good, had been too sedulously improved by subsequent study to give way to any imaginary terrors; and after giving a glance around him, he again demanded of the artist who he was, and by what accident he came to know and address him by his name.

"Your worship cannot but remember," said the smith, "that about three years since, upon Saint Lucy's Eve, there came a travelling juggler to a certain Hall in Devonshire, and exhibited his skill before a worshipful knight and a fair company—I see from your worship's countenance, dark as this place is, that my memory has not done me wrong."

"Thou hast said enough," said Tressilian, turning away, as wishing to hide from the speaker the painful train of recollections which his discourse had unconsciously awakened.

"The juggler," said the smith, "played his part so bravely, that the clowns and clown-like squires in the company held his art to be little less than magical; but there was one maiden of fifteen, or thereby, with the fairest face I ever looked upon, whose rosy cheek grew pale, and her bright eyes dim, at the sight of the wonders exhibited."

"I think," proceeded Tressilian, after a minute's silence, "thou wert in those days a jovial fellow, who could keep a company merry by song, and tale, and rebeck, as well as by thy juggling tricks—why do I find thee a laborious handicraftsman, plying thy trade in so melancholy a dwelling, and under such extraordinary circumstances?"

"It was not long after I had performed at Sir Hugh Robsart's in your worship's presence," said the artist, "that I took myself to the stage, and have swaggered with the bravest of them all, both at the Black Bull, the Globe, the Fortune, and elsewhere; but I know not how—apples were so plenty that year, that the lads in the twopenny gallery never took more than one bite out of them, and threw the rest of the pippin at whatever actor chanced to be on the stage. So I tired of it—renounced my half share in the company—gave my foil to my comrade—my buskins to the wardrobe, and showed the theatre a clean pair of heels."

"Well, friend, and what," said Tressilian, "was your next shift?"

"I became," said the smith, "half partner, half domestic to a man of much skill and little substance, who practised the trade of a physicianer. He was a learned distiller of simples, and a profound chemist—made several efforts to fix mercury, and judged himself to have made a fair hit at the philosopher's stone. At length, my master suddenly disappeared, pretending to me that he was about to visit his elaboratory in this place, and forbidding me to disturb him till two days were past. When this period had elapsed, I became anxious, and resorted to this vault, where I found the fires extinguished and the utensils in confusion, with a note from the learned Doboobius, as he was wont to style himself, acquainting me that we should never meet again, bequeathing me his chemical apparatus and the parchment which I have just put into your hands, advising me strongly to prosecute the secret which it contained, which would infallibly lead me to the discovery of the grand magisterium."

"And didst thou follow this sage advice?" said Tressilian.

"Worshipful sir, no," replied the smith; "for being by nature cautious and suspicious, from knowing with whom I had to do, I made so many perquisitions before I ventured even to light a fire, that I at length discovered a small barrel of gunpowder, carefully hid beneath the furnace, with the purpose, no doubt, that as soon as I should commence the grand work of the transmutation of metals, the explosion should transmute the vault and all in it into a heap of ruins, which might serve at once for my slaughter-house and my grave. This cured me of alchemy, and fain would I have returned to the honest hammer and anvil; but who would bring a horse to be shod by the Devil's post? Meantime I had won the regard of my honest Flibbertigibbet here, he being then at Farringdon with his master, the sage Erasmus Holiday, by teaching him a few secrets such as please youth at his age; and after much counsel together, we agreed, that since I could get no practice in the ordinary way, I should try how I could work out business among these ignorant boors, by practising upon their silly fears; and thanks to Flibbertigibbet, who hath spread my renown, I have not wanted custom. But it is won at too great risk, and I fear I shall be at length taken up for a wizard; so that I seek but an opportunity to leave this vault when I can have the protection of some worshipful person against the fury of the populace, in case they chance to recognise me."

"And art thou," said Tressilian, "perfectly acquainted with the roads in this country?"

"I could ride them every inch by midnight," answered Wayland Smith, which was the name this adept had assumed.

"Thou hast no horse to ride upon," said Tressilian.

"Pardon me," replied Wayland; "I have as good a tit as ever yeoman bestrode; and I forgot to say it was the best part of the mediciner's legacy to me, excepting one or two of the choicest of his medical secrets, which I picked up without his knowledge and against his will."

"Get thyself washed and shaved, then," said Tressilian; "reform thy dress as well as thou canst, and fling away those grotesque trappings; and, so thou wilt be secret and faithful, thou shalt follow me for a short time, till thy pranks here are forgotten. Thou hast, I think, both address and courage, and I have matter to do that may require both."

Wayland Smith eagerly embraced the proposal, and protested his devotion to his new master. In a very few minutes he had made so great an alteration in his original appearance, by change of dress, trimming his beard and hair, and so forth, that Tressilian could not help remarking, that he thought he would stand in little need of a protector, since none of his old acquaintances were likely to recognise him.

"My debtors would not pay me money," said Wayland, shaking his head; "but my creditors of every kind would be less easily blinded. And in truth, I hold myself not safe, unless under the protection of a gentleman of birth and character, as is your worship."

So saying he led the way out of the cavern. He then called loudly for Hobgoblin, who, after lingering for an instant, appeared with the horse furniture, when Wayland closed and sedulously covered up the trap-door, observing it might again serve him at his need, besides that the tools were worth somewhat. A whistle from the owner brought to his side a nag that fed quietly on the common, and was accustomed to the signal. While he accoutred him for the journey, Tressilian drew his own girths faster, and in a few minutes both were ready to mount.

Flibbertigibbet, bidding both of them farewell, ran homeward with the same uncommon velocity with which he had baffled Tressilian's former attempts to get hold of him.

They continued their journey towards Devonshire without further adventure, until they alighted at an inn in the town of Marlborough, since celebrated for having given title to the greatest general (excepting one) whom Britain ever produced.

The next morning found them early travellers. And, not to fatigue the reader with unnecessary particulars, they traversed without adventure the counties of Wiltshire and Somerset, and about noon of the third day after Tressilian's leaving Cumnor, arrived at Sir Hugh Robsart's seat, called Lidcote Hall, on the frontiers of Devonshire.

IX

THE ancient seat of Lidcote Hall was situated near the village of the same name, and adjoined the wild and extensive forest of Exmoor, plentifully stocked with game, in which some ancient rights, belonging to the Robsart family, entitle Sir Hugh to pursue his favourite amusement of the chase. The old mansion was a low, venerable building, occupying a considerable space of ground, which was surrounded by a deep moat. The approach and drawbridge were defended by an octagonal tower, of ancient brick-work, but so clothed with ivy and other creepers, that it was difficult to discover of what materials it was constructed.

The entrance to the courtyard of the old mansion lay through an archway, surmounted by the aforesaid tower, but the drawbridge was down, and one leaf of the iron-studded folding-doors stood carelessly open. Tressilian hastily rode over the drawbridge, entered the court, and began to call loudly on the domestics by their names. For some time he was only answered by the echoes and the howling of the hounds, whose kennel lay at no great distance from the mansion, and was surrounded by the same moat. At length Will Badger, the old and favourite attendant of the knight, who acted alike as squire of his body, and superintendent of his sports, made his appearance. The stout, weather-beaten forester showed great signs of joy when he recognised Tressilian.

"Lord love you," he said, "Master Edmund, be it thou in flesh and fell?—Then, thou mayest do some good on Sir Hugh, for it passes the wit of man, that is, of mine own, and the Curate's and Master Mumblazen's, to do aught wi' un."

"Is Sir Hugh then worse since I went away, Will?" demanded Tressilian.

"For worse in body—no—he is much better," replied the domestic; "but he is clean mazed as it were—eats and drinks as he was wont—but sleeps not, or rather wakes not, for he is ever in a sort of twilight, that is neither sleeping nor waking. Dame Swineford thought it was like the dead palsy.—But, no, no, dame, said I, it is the heart, it is the heart."

"You tell a heavy tale, Will," replied Tressilian; "but God must help us—there is no aid in man."

As he spoke the door opened, and Master Mumblazen appeared; a withered, thin, elderly gentleman, with a cheek like a winter apple, and his grey hair partly concealed by a small high hat, shaped like a cone, or rather like such a strawberry-basket as London fruiterers exhibit at their windows. He was too sententious a person to waste words on mere salutation; so, having welcomed Tressilian with a nod and a shake of the hand, he beckoned him to follow to Sir Hugh's great chamber, which the good knight usually inhabited. Will Badger followed, unasked, anxious to see whether his master would be relieved from his state of apathy by the arrival of Tressilian.

In a long low parlour, amply furnished with implements of the chase, and with silvan trophies, by a massive stone chimney, over which hung a sword and suit of armour, somewhat obscured by neglect, sat Sir Hugh Robsart of Lidcote, a man of large size which had been only kept within moderate compass by the constant use of violent exercise. It seemed to Tressilian that the lethargy under which his old friend appeared to labour, had, even during his few weeks' absence, added bulk to his person, at least it had obviously diminished the vivacity of his eye, which, as they entered, first followed Master Mumblazen slowly to a large oaken desk, on which a ponderous volume lay open, and then rested, as if in uncertainty, on the stranger who had entered along with him. The Curate, a grey-headed clergyman, who had been a confessor in the days of Queen Mary, sat with a book in his hand in another recess in the apartment. He, too, signed a mournful greeting to Tressilian, and laid his book aside, to watch the effect his appearance should produce on the afflicted old man.

"I will ask thee no questions," said the old knight; "no questions—none, Edmund—thou hast not found her, or so found her, that she were better lost."

Tressilian was unable to reply, otherwise than by putting his hands before his face.

"It is enough—it is enough. But do not thou weep for her, Edmund. I have cause to weep, for she was my daughter—thou hast cause to rejoice, that she did not become thy wife. Great God! thou knowest best what is good for us—It was my nightly prayer that I should see Amy and Edmund wedded—had it been granted, it had now been gall added to bitterness."

"Be comforted, my friend," said the Curate, addressing Sir Hugh, "it cannot be that the daughter of all our hopes and affections is the vile creature you would bespeak her."

Tressilian and the Curate joined in urging the exhausted old man to lay himself to rest, and at length prevailed. Tressilian remained by his pillow till he saw that slumber at length sunk down on him, and then returned to consult with the Curate, what steps should be adopted in these unhappy circumstances.

"We have had an unhappy time of it with the good Knight, Master Edmund," said the Curate. "I have not suffered so much since I was torn away from my beloved flock, and compelled to abandon them to the Romish wolves."

"That was *in Tertio Mariæ*," said Master Mumblazen.

"In the name of Heaven," continued the Curate, "tell us, has your time been better spent than ours, or have you any news of that unhappy maiden, who, being for so many years the principal joy of this broken-down house, is now proved our greatest unhappiness? Have you not at least discovered her place of residence?"

"I have," replied Tressilian. "Know you Cumnor Place, near Oxford?"

"Surely," said the clergyman; "it was a house of removal for the monks of Abingdon."

"Whose arms," said Master Michael, "I have seen over a stone chimney in the hall—a cross patonce betwixt four martlets."

"There," said Tressilian, "this unhappy maiden resides, in company with the villain Varney. But for a strange mishap, my sword had revenged all our injuries, as well as hers, on his worthless head."

"Thank God, that kept thine hand from blood-guiltiness, rash young man!" answered the Curate. "Vengeance is mine, saith the Lord, and I will repay it. It were better study to free her from the villain's nets of infamy."

"They are called in heraldry, *laquei amoris*, or *lacs d'amour*," said Mumblazen.

"It is in that I require your aid, my friends," said Tressilian; "I am resolved to accuse this villain, at the very foot of the throne, of falsehood, seduction, and breach of hospitable laws. The Queen shall hear me, though the Earl of Leicester, the villain's patron, stood at her right hand."

"If it be your object, as I cannot question," said the clergyman, "to save, as much as is yet possible, the credit of this unhappy young woman, you should apply, in the first instance, to the Earl of Leicester. He is as absolute in his household as the Queen in her kingdom, and if he expresses to Varney that such is his pleasure, her honour will not stand so publicly committed."

"You are right, you are right," said Tressilian eagerly, "and I thank you for pointing out what I overlooked in my haste. But I must prepare for my journey. Do you, gentlemen, dispose my patron to grant me such powers as are needful to act in his name."

So saying, Tressilian left the room.

"He is too hot," said the Curate; "and I pray to God that he may grant him the patience to deal with Varney as is fitting."

"Patience and Varney," said Mumblazen, "is worse heraldry than metal upon metal. He is more false than a siren, more rapacious than a griffin, more poisonous than a wyvern, and more cruel than a lion rampant."

"Yet I doubt much," said the Curate, "whether we can with all right ask from Sir Hugh Robsart, being in his present condition, any deed deputing his paternal right in Mistress Amy to whomsoever——"

"Your reverence need not doubt that," said Will Badger, who entered as he spoke, "for I will lay my life he is another man when he wakes, than he has been these thirty days past."

"Ay, Will," said the Curate, "hast thou then so much confidence in Doctor Diddleum's draught?"

"Not a whit," said Will, "because master ne'er tasted a drop on't, seeing it was emptied out by the housemaid. But here's a gentleman, who came attending on Master Tressilian, has given Sir Hugh a draught that is worth twenty of yon un. I have spoken cunningly with him, and a better farrier, or one who hath a more just notion of horse and dog ailment, I have never seen; and such a one would never be unjust to a Christian man."

"A farrier! you saucy groom.—And by whose authority, pray?" said the Curate, rising in surprise and indignation; "or who will be warrant for this new physician?"

"For authority, an it like your reverence, he had mine; and for warrant, I trust I have not been five-and-twenty years in this house, without having right to warrant the giving of a draught to beast or body—I who can gie a drench and a ball, and bleed, or blister, if need, to my very self."

The counsellors of the house of Robsart thought it meet to carry this information instantly to Tressilian, who as speedily summoned before him Wayland Smith, and demanded of him (in private however) by what authority he had ventured to administer any medicine to Sir Hugh Robsart.

"Why," replied the artist, "your worship cannot but remember that I told you I had made more progress into my master's—I mean the learned Doctor Doboobie's—mystery than he was willing to own; and I hope I am able enough to administer a poor dose of mandragora, which, with the sleep that must needs follow, is all that Sir Hugh Robsart requires to settle his distraught brains."

"I trust thou dealest fairly with me, Wayland?" said Tressilian.

"Most fairly and honestly, as the event shall show," replied the artist. "What would it avail me to harm the poor old man for whom you are interested?—I trust to yoke myself as a humble follower to your worship's train, and I only wish to have my faith judged of by the result of the good Knight's slumbers."

Wayland Smith was right in his prognostication. The sedative draught which his skill had prepared, and Will Badger's confidence had administered, was attended with the most beneficial effects. The patient's sleep was long and healthful; and the poor old knight awoke, humbled indeed in thought, and weak in frame, yet a much better judge of whatever was subjected to his intellect than he had been for some time past. He resisted for a while the proposal made by his friends, that Tressilian should undertake a journey to court, to attempt the recovery of his daughter, and the redress of her wrongs, in so far as they might yet be repaired. "Let her go," he said; "she is but a hawk that goes down the wind; I would not bestow even a whistle to reclaim her." But though he for some time maintained this argument, he was at length convinced it was his duty to take the part to which natural affection inclined him, and consent that such efforts as could yet be made should be used by Tressilian in behalf of his daughter. He subscribed, therefore, a warrant of attorney, such as the Curate's skill enabled him to draw up; for in those simple days the clergy were often the advisers of their flock in law as well as in gospel.

While Tressilian was making preparations for his departure early the ensuing morning, Wayland Smith desired to speak with him; and expressing his hope that he had been pleased with the operation of his medicine in behalf of Sir Hugh Robsart, added his desire to accompany him to court. This was indeed what Tressilian himself had several times thought of: for the shrewdness, alertness of understanding, and variety of resource, which this fellow had exhibited during the time they had travelled together, had made him sensible that his assistance might be of importance. Ere he had come to a determination, the trampling of a horse was heard in the court-yard, and Master Mumblazen and Will Badger both entered hastily into Tressilian's chamber, speaking almost at the same moment.

"Here is a serving-man on the bonniest grey tit I ever see'd in my life," said Will Badger, who got the start;— "having on his arm a silver cognisance, being a fire-drake holding in his mouth a brick-bat, under a coronet of an Earl's degree," said Master Mumblazen, "and bearing a letter sealed of the same."

Tressilian took the letter, which was addressed "To the worshipful Master Edmund Tressilian, our loving kinsman.—These—ride, ride, ride—for thy life, for thy life, for thy life." He then opened it, and found the following contents :—

"MASTER TRESSILIAN, OUR
GOOD FRIEND AND COUSIN,

"We are at present so ill at ease, and otherwise so unhappily circumstanced, that we are desirous to have around us those of our friends on whose loving kindness we can most especially repose confidence ; amongst whom we hold our good Master Tressilian one of the foremost and nearest, both in good will and good ability. We therefore pray you, with your most convenient speed, to repair to our poor lodging, at Say's Court, near Deptford, where we will treat farther with you of matters which we deem it not fit to commit unto writing. And so we bid you heartily farewell, being your loving kinsman to command,

"RATCLIFFE, EARL OF SUSSEX."

"Send up the messenger instantly, Will Badger," said Tressilian ; and as the man entered the room, he exclaimed, "Aha, Stevens, is it you ? how does my good lord ?"

"Ill, Master Tressilian," was the messenger's reply, "and having therefore the more need of good friends around him."

"What are the symptoms ?" said Wayland Smith, stepping forward hastily.

The man looked at Tressilian, as if to know whether he should answer these inquiries from a stranger, and receiving a sign in the affirmative, he hastily enumerated gradual loss of strength, nocturnal perspiration, and loss of appetite, faintness, etc.

"Joined," said Wayland, "to a gnawing pain in the stomach, and a low fever ?"

"Even so," said the messenger, somewhat surprised.

"I know how the disease is caused," said the artist, "and I know the cause. Your master has eaten of the manna of Saint Nicholas. I know the cure too—my master shall not say I studied in his laboratory for nothing."

"How mean you ?" said Tressilian, frowning ; "we speak of one of the first nobles of England. Bethink you, this is no subject for buffoonery."

"God forbid !" said Wayland Smith. "I say that I know his disease and can cure him. Remember what I did for Sir Hugh Robsart."

"We will set forth instantly," said Tressilian. "God calls us."

Accordingly, hastily mentioning this new motive for his instant departure, though without alluding to either the suspicions of Stevens or the assurances of Wayland Smith, he took the kindest leave of Sir Hugh and the family at Lidcote Hall, who accompanied him with prayers and blessings, and, attended by Wayland and the Earl of Sussex's domestic, travelled with the utmost speed towards London.

X

TRESSILIAN and his attendants pressed their route with all despatch. He had asked the smith, indeed, when their departure was resolved on, whether he would not rather choose to avoid Berkshire, in which he had played a part so conspicuous. But Wayland returned a confident answer. He had employed the short interval they passed at Lidcote Hall in transforming himself in a wonderful manner. His wild and overgrown thicket of beard was now restrained to two small moustaches on the upper lip, turned up in a military fashion. In a handsome suit of Tressilian's livery, with a sword by his side, and a buckler on his shoulder, he looked like a gay ruffling serving-man, whose age might be betwixt thirty and thirty-five, the very prime of human life. His loutish, savage-looking demeanour seemed equally changed into a forward, sharp, and impudent alertness of look and action.

The haste of the travellers admitted their making no stay upon their journey, save what the refreshment of the horses required; and as many of the places through which they passed were under the influence of the Earl of Leicester, or persons immediately dependent on him, they thought it prudent to disguise their names, and the purpose of their journey.

At length they approached the metropolis, where, owing to the more general recourse of strangers, their appearance excited neither observation nor inquiry, and finally they entered London itself.

It was Tressilian's purpose to go down directly to Deptford, where Lord Sussex resided, in order to be near the court, then held at Greenwich, the favourite residence of Elizabeth, and honoured as her birthplace. A short hour's riding brought them to the present habitation of Lord Sussex, an ancient house, called Say's Court, near Deptford, which had long pertained to a family of that name, but had, for upwards of a century, been possessed by the ancient and honourable family of Evelyn.

Say's Court was watched like a beleaguered fort; and so high rose the suspicions of the time, that Tressilian and his attendants were stopped and questioned repeatedly by sentinels, both on foot and horseback, as they approached the abode of the sick Earl. In truth, the high rank which Sussex held in Queen Elizabeth's favour, and his known and avowed rivalry of the Earl of Leicester, caused the utmost importance to be attached to his welfare; for, at the period we treat of, all men doubted whether he or the Earl of Leicester might ultimately have the higher rank in her regard.

Elizabeth, like many of her sex, was fond of governing by factions, so as to balance two opposing interests, and reserve in her own hand the power of making either predominate, as the interest of the state, or perhaps as her own female caprice (for to that foible even she was not superior), might finally determine. To finesse—to hold the cards—to oppose one interest to another—to bridle him who thought himself highest in her esteem, by the fears he must entertain of another equally trusted, if not equally beloved, were arts which she used throughout her reign, and which enabled her, though frequently giving way to the weakness of favouritism, to prevent most of its evil effects on her kingdom and government.

The two nobles who at present stood as rivals in her favour, possessed very different pretensions to share it; yet it might be in general said, that the Earl of Sussex had been most serviceable to the Queen, while Leicester was most dear to the woman. Sussex was, according to the phrase of the times, a martialist; had done good service in Ireland and in Scotland, and especially in the great northern rebellion in 1569, which was quelled, in a great measure, by his military talents. But in person, features, and address, weapons so formidable in the court of a female sovereign, Leicester had advantages more than sufficient to counterbalance the military services, high blood, and frank bearing of the Earl of Sussex; and he bore in the eye of the court and kingdom, the higher share in Elizabeth's favour, though (for such was her uniform policy) by no means so decidedly expressed as to warrant him against the final preponderance of his rival's pretensions. The illness of Sussex, therefore, happened so opportunely for Leicester, as to give rise to strange surmises among the public; while the followers of the one Earl were filled with the deepest apprehensions, and those of the other with the highest hopes of its probable issue. Meanwhile—for in that old time men never forgot the probability that the matter might be determined by length of sword,—the retainers of each noble flocked around their patron, appeared well armed in the vicinity of the court itself, and disturbed the ear of the sovereign by their frequent and alarming debates, held even within the precincts of her palace. This preliminary statement is necessary, to render what follows intelligible to the reader.

On Tressilian's arrival at Say's Court, he found the place filled with the retainers of the Earl of Sussex, and of the gentlemen who came to attend their patron in his illness. Arms were in every hand, and a deep gloom on every countenance, as if they had apprehended an immediate and violent assault from the opposite faction. In the hall, however, to which Tressilian was ushered by one of the Earl's attendants, while another went to inform Sussex of his arrival, he found only two gentlemen in waiting. At the entrance of Tressilian both started from their musing, and bade him welcome, the younger, in particular, with great appearance of animation and cordiality.

"Thou art welcome, Tressilian," said the youth; "thy philosophy stole thee from us when this household had objects of ambition to offer—it is an honest philosophy, since it returns thee to us when there are only dangers to be shared."

"Is my lord, then, so dangerously indisposed?" said Tressilian.

"We fear the very worst," answered the elder gentleman, "and by the worst practice."

"Fie," replied Tressilian, "my Lord of Leicester is honourable."

"What doth he with such attendants, then, as he hath about him?" said the younger gallant. "The man who raises the devil may be honest, but he is answerable for the mischief which the fiend does, for all that."

At this moment the Earl's chamberlain entered, and informed Tressilian that his lord required to speak with him.

He found Lord Sussex dressed, but unbraced and lying on his couch, and was shocked at the alteration disease had made in his person. The Earl received him with the most friendly cordiality, and inquired into the state of his courtship. Tressilian evaded his inquiries for a moment, and turning his discourse on the Earl's own health, he discovered, to his surprise, that the symptoms of his disorder corresponded minutely with those which Wayland had predicted concerning it. He hesitated not, therefore, to communicate to Sussex the whole history of his attendant, and the pretensions he set up to cure the disorder under which he laboured. On being summoned to the Earl's presence, Wayland Smith told his former tale with firmness and consistency.

"It may be," said the Earl, "thou art sent by those who have begun this work, to end it for them; but bethink, if I miscarry under thy medicine, it may go hard with thee."

"That were severe measure," said Wayland, "since the issue of medicine, and the end of life, are in God's disposal. But I will stand the risk. I have not lived so long under ground to be afraid of a grave."

"Nay, if thou be'st so confident," said the Earl of Sussex, "I will take the risk too, for the learned can do nothing for me. Tell me how this medicine is to be taken."

"That will I do presently," said Wayland: "but allow me to condition that, since I incur all the risk of this treatment, no other physician shall be permitted to interfere with it."

"That is but fair," replied the Earl; "and now prepare your drug."

While Wayland obeyed the Earl's commands, his servants, by the artist's direction, undressed their master, and placed him in bed.

"I warn you," he said, "that the first operation of this medicine will be to produce a heavy sleep, during which time the chamber must be kept undisturbed, as the consequences may otherwise be fatal. I myself will watch by the Earl, with any of the gentlemen of his chamber."

"Let all leave the room save Stanley and this good fellow," said the Earl.

"And saving me also," said Tressilian. "I too am deeply interested in the effects of this potion."

"Be it so, good friend," said the Earl; "and now for our experiment; but first call my secretary and chamberlain."

"Bear witness," he continued, when these officers arrived, "bear witness for me, gentlemen, that our honourable friend Tressilian is in no way responsible for the effects which this medicine may produce upon me, the taking it being my own free action and choice, in regard I believe it to be a remedy which God has furnished me by unexpected means, to recover me of my present malady. Commend me to my noble and princely Mistress; and say that I live and die her true servant, and wish to all about her throne the same singleness of heart and will to serve her, with more ability to do so than hath been assigned to poor Thomas Ratcliffe."

He then folded his hands, and seemed for a second or two absorbed in mental devotion, then took the potion in his hand, and pausing, regarded Wayland with a look that seemed designed to penetrate his very soul, but which caused no anxiety or hesitation in the countenance or manner of the artist.

"Here is nothing to be feared," said Sussex to Tressilian; and swallowed the medicine without further hesitation.

"I am now to pray your lordship," said Wayland, "to dispose yourself to rest as commodiously as you can; and of you, gentlemen, to remain as still and mute as if you waited at your mother's deathbed."

The chamberlain and secretary then withdrew, giving orders that all doors be bolted, and all noise in the house strictly prohibited. Several gentlemen were voluntary watchers in the hall, but none remained in the chamber of the sick Earl, save his groom of the chamber Stanley, the artist, and Tressilian.—Wayland Smith's predictions were speedily accomplished, and a sleep fell upon the Earl, so deep and sound, that they who watched his bedside began to fear that, in his weakened state, he might pass away without awakening from his lethargy. Wayland Smith himself appeared anxious, and felt the temples of the Earl slightly, from time to time, attending particularly to the state of respiration, which was full and deep, but at the same time easy and uninterrupted.

XI

MORNING was well advanced, when Tressilian, fatigued and over-watched, came down to the hall with the joyful intelligence, that the Earl had awakened of himself, that he found his internal complaints much mitigated, and spoke with a cheerfulness, and looked round with a vivacity, which of themselves showed a material and favourable change had taken place. Tressilian at the same time commanded the attendance of one or two of his followers, to report what had passed during the night, and to relieve the watchers in the Earl's chamber.

A message from the Queen having been communicated to the Earl of Sussex, he commanded Blount, his master of the horse, instantly to take boat, and go down the river to the Palace of Greenwich, taking young Walter and Tracy with him, and make a suitable compliment, expressing his grateful thanks to his Sovereign.

"A plague on it," said Blount, as he descended the stairs, "had he sent me with a cartel to Leicester, I think I should have done his errand indifferently well. But to go to our gracious Sovereign, before whom all words must be lackered over either with gilding or with sugar, is such a confectionary matter as clean baffles my poor old English brain.—Come with me, Tracy, and come you too, Master Walter Wittypate. Let us see if thy neat brain, that frames so many flashy fireworks, can help out a plain fellow at need with some of thy shrewd devices."

They were soon launched on the princely bosom of the broad Thames, upon which the sun now shone forth in all its splendour.

"There are two things scarce matched in the universe," said Walter to Blount—"the sun in heaven, and the Thames on the earth."

"The one will light us to Greenwich well enough," said Blount, "and the other would take us there a little faster, if it were ebb-tide—and by my honour," he added, looking out from the head of the boat, "it seems to me as if our message were a sort of labour in vain; for see, the Queen's barge lies at the stairs, as if her Majesty were about to take water."

It was even so. The royal barge, manned with the Queen's watermen, richly attired in the regal liveries, and having the banner of England displayed, did indeed lie at the great stairs which ascended from the river, and along with it two or three other boats for transporting such part of her retinue as were not in immediate attendance on the royal person. The yeomen of the guard, the tallest and most handsome men whom England could produce, guarded with their halberds the passage from the palace-gate to the river-side, and all seemed in readiness for the Queen's coming forth, although the day was yet so early.

"By my faith, this bodes us no good," said Blount; "it must be some perilous cause puts her Grace in motion thus untimeously. By my counsel, we were best put back again, and tell the Earl what we have seen.'

"Tell the Earl what we have seen!" said Walter; "why, what have we seen but a boat, and men with scarlet jerkins, and halberds in their hands? Let us do his errand, and tell him what the Queen says in reply."

So saying, he caused the boat to be pulled towards a landing place at some distance from the principal one, which it would not, at that moment, have been thought respectful to approach, and jumped on shore, followed, though with reluctance, by his cautious and timid companions. As they approached the gate of the palace, one of the sergeant porters told them they could not at present enter, as her Majesty was in the act of coming forth. The gentlemen used the name of the Earl of Sussex; but it proved no charm to subdue the officer, who alleged in reply, that it was as much as his post was worth, to disobey in the least tittle the commands which he had received.

"Nay, I told you as much before," said Blount; "do, I pray you, my dear Walter, let us take boat and return."

"Not till I see the Queen come forth," returned the youth, composedly.

"Thou art mad, stark mad, by the mass!" answered Blount.

"And thou," said Walter, "art turned coward of the sudden. I have seen thee face half a score of shag-headed Irish kernes to thy own share of them, an now thou wouldst blink and go back to shun the frown of a fair lady!"

At this moment the gates opened, and ushers began to issue forth in array, preceded and flanked by the band of Gentlemen Pensioners. After this, amid a crowd of lords and ladies, yet so disposed around her that she could see and be seen on all sides, came Elizabeth herself, then in the prime of womanhood, and in the full glow of what in a Sovereign was called beauty, and who would in the lowest rank of life have been truly judged a noble figure, joined to a striking and commanding physiognomy. She leant on the arm of Lord Hunsdon, whose relation to her by her mother's side often procured him such distinguished marks of Elizabeth's intimacy.

The young cavalier we have so often mentioned had probably never yet approached so near the person of his Sovereign, and he pressed forward as far as the line of warders permitted, in order to avail himself of the present opportunity. His companion, on the contrary, cursing his imprudence, kept pulling him backwards, till Walter shook him off impatiently, letting his rich cloak drop carelessly from one shoulder a natural action, which served, however, to display to the best advantage his well-proportioned person. Unbonneting at the same time, he fixed his eager gaze on the Queen's approach, with a mixture of respectful curiosity, and modest yet ardent admiration, which suited so well with his fine features, that the warders, struck with his rich attire and noble countenance, suffered him to approach the ground over which the Queen was to pass, somewhat closer than was permitted to ordinary spectators. Thus the adventurous youth stood full in Elizabeth's eye—an eye never indifferent to the admiration which she deservedly excited among her subjects, or to the fair proportions of external form which chanced to distinguish any of her courtiers. Accordingly, she fixed her keen glance on the youth, as she approached the place where he stood, with a look in which surprise at his boldness seemed to be unmingled with resentment, while a trifling accident happened which attracted her attention towards him yet more strongly. The night had been rainy, and just where the young gentleman stood, a small quantity of mud interrupted the Queen's passage. As she hesitated to pass on, the gallant, throwing his cloak from his shoulders, laid it on the miry spot, so as to ensure her stepping over it dryshod. Elizabeth looked at the young man, who accompanied this act of devoted courtesy with a profound reverence and a blush that overspread his whole countenance. The Queen was confused, and blushed in her turn, nodded her head, hastily passed on, and embarked in her barge without saying a word.

"Come along, Sir Coxcomb," said Blount, "your gay cloak will need the brush to-day, I wot. Nay, if you had meant to make a foot-cloth of your mantle, better have kept Tracy's old drap-de-bure, which despises all colours."

"This cloak," said the youth, taking it up and folding it, "shall never be brushed while in my possession."

"And that will not be long, if you learn not a little more economy—we shall have you in *cuerpo* soon, as the Spaniard says."

Their discourse was here interrupted by one of the band of Pensioners.

"I was sent," said he, after looking at them attentively, "to a gentleman who hath no cloak, or a muddy one. You, sir, I think," addressing the younger cavalier, "are the man; you will please to follow me."

"He is in attendance on me," said Blount, "on me, the noble Earl of Sussex's master of horse."

"I have nothing to say to that," answered the messenger; "my orders are directly from her Majesty, and concern this gentleman only."

So saying, he walked away, followed by Walter, leaving the others behind, Blount's eyes almost starting from his head with the excess of his astonishment. At length he gave vent to it in an exclamation—"Who the good jere would have thought this?" And shaking his head with a mysterious air, he walked to his own boat, embarked, and returned to Deptford.

The young cavalier was, in the meanwhile, guided to the water-side by the Pensioner, who showed him considerable respect; a circumstance which, to persons in his situation, may be considered as an augury of no small consequence. He ushered him into one of the wherries which lay ready to attend the Queen's barge, which was already proceeding up the river, with the advantage of that flood-tide, of which, in the course of their descent, Blount had complained to his associates.

The two rowers used their oars with such expedition at the signal of the Gentleman Pensioner, that they very soon brought their little skiff under the stern of the Queen's boat, where she sate beneath an awning, attended by two or three ladies, and the nobles of her household. She looked more than once at the wherry in which the young adventurer was seated, spoke to those around her, and seemed to laugh. At length one of the attendants, by the Queen's order apparently, made a sign for the wherry to come alongside, and the young man was desired to step from his own skiff into the Queen's barge, which he performed with graceful agility at the fore part of the boat, and was brought aft to the Queen's presence, the wherry at the same time dropping into the rear. The youth underwent the gaze of majesty, not the less gracefully that his self-possession was mingled with embarrassment. The muddied cloak still hung upon his arm, and formed the natural topic with which the Queen introduced the conversation.

"You have this day spoiled a gay mantle in our service, young man. We thank you for your service, though the manner of offering it was unusual, and something bold."

"In a sovereign's need," answered the youth, "it is each liegeman's duty to be bold."

"God's pity! that was well said, my lord," said the Queen, turning to a grave person who sate by her, and answered with a grave inclination of the head, and something of a mumbled assent. "Well, young man, your gallantry shall not go unrewarded. Go to the wardrobe keeper, and he shall have orders to supply the suit which you have cast away in our service. Thou shalt have a suit, and that of the newest cut, I promise thee, on the word of a princess."

"May it please your grace," said Walter, hesitating, "it is not for so humble a servant of your Majesty to measure out your bounties; but if it became me to choose——"

"Thou wouldst have gold, I warrant me," said the Queen, interrupting him; "fie, young man! I take shame to say, that, in our capital, such and so various are the means of thriftless folly, that to give gold to youth is giving fuel to fire, and furnishing them with the means of self-destruction. If I live and reign, these means of unchristian excess shall be abridged. Yet thou mayest be poor," she added, "or thy parents may be—it shall be gold, if thou wilt, but thou shalt answer to me for the use on't."

Walter waited patiently until the Queen had done, and then modestly assured her, that gold was still less in his wish than the raiment her Majesty had before offered.

"How, boy!" said the Queen, "neither gold nor garment? What is it thou wouldst have of me then?"

"Only permission, madam—if it is not asking too high an honour—permission to wear the cloak which did you this trifling service."

"Permission to wear thine own cloak, thou silly boy?" said the Queen.

"It is no longer mine," said Walter; "when your Majesty's foot touched it, it became a fit mantle for a prince, but far too rich a one for its former owner."

The Queen again blushed; and endeavoured to cover, by laughing, a slight degree of not unpleasing surprise and confusion.

"Heard you ever the like, my lords? The youth's head is turned with reading romances—I must know something of him, that I may send him safe to his friends.—But for thee, young man, what is thy name and birth?"

"Raleigh is my name, most gracious Queen, the youngest son of a large but honourable family of Devonshire."

"Raleigh?" said Elizabeth, after a moment's recollection, "have we not heard of your service in Ireland?"

"I have been so fortunate as to do some service there, madam," replied Raleigh, "scarce however of consequence sufficient to reach your Grace's ears."

"They hear farther than you think of," said the Queen, graciously, "and have heard of a youth who defended a ford in Shannon against a whole band of wild Irish rebels, until the stream ran purple with their blood and his own."

"Some blood I may have lost," said the youth, looking down, "but it was where my best is due; and that is in your Majesty's service."

The Queen paused, and then said hastily, "You are very young to have fought so well, and to speak so well. So hark ye, Master Raleigh, see thou fail not to wear thy muddy cloak till our pleasure be farther known. And here," she added, giving him a jewel of gold, in the form of a chessman, "I give thee this to wear at the collar."

Raleigh, to whom nature had taught intuitively, as it were, those courtly arts which many scarce acquire from long experience, knelt, and, as he took from her hand the jewel, kissed the fingers which gave it. He knew, perhaps, better than almost any of the courtiers who surrounded her, how to mix the devotion claimed by the Queen, with the gallantry due to her personal beauty—and in this, his first attempt to unite them, he succeeded so well, as at once to gratify Elizabeth's personal vanity, and her love of power.

His master, the Earl of Sussex, had the full advantage of the satisfaction which Raleigh had afforded Elizabeth on their first interview.

"My lords and ladies," said the Queen, looking around to the retinue by whom she was attended, "methinks, since we are upon the river, it were well to renounce our present purpose of going to the city, and surprise the poor Earl of Sussex with a visit. What think ye? were it not an act of charity to give him such consolation as the thanks of a Queen, much bound to him for his loyal service, may perchance best minister?"

It may be readily supposed, that none to whom this speech was addressed, ventured to oppose its purport.

"Your Grace," said the Bishop of Lincoln, "is the breath of our nostrils." The men of war averred, that the face of the Sovereign was a whetstone to the soldier's sword; while the men of state were not less of opinion, that the light of the Queen's countenance was a lamp to the paths of her councillors; and the ladies agreed, with one voice, that no noble in England so well deserved the regard of England's royal Mistress as the Earl of Sussex—the Earl of Leicester's right being reserved entire; so some of the more politic worded their assent—an exception to which Elizabeth paid no apparent attention. The barge had, therefore, orders to deposit its royal freight at Deptford, at the nearest and most convenient point of communication with Say's Court, in order that the Queen might satisfy her royal and maternal solicitude, by making personal inquiries after the health of the Earl of Sussex.

Raleigh, whose acute spirit foresaw and anticipated important consequences from the most trifling events, hastened to ask the Queen's permission to go in the skiff, and announce the royal visit to his master, ingeniously suggesting, that the joyful surprise might prove prejudicial to his health, since the richest and most generous cordials may sometimes be fatal to those who have been long in a languishing state.

But whether the Queen deemed it too presumptuous in so young a courtier to interpose his opinion unasked, or whether she was moved by a recurrence of the feeling of jealousy, which had been instilled into her, by reports that the Earl kept armed men about his person, she desired Raleigh, sharply, to reserve his counsel till it was required of him, and repeated her former orders, to be landed at Deptford, adding, "We will ourselves see what sort of household my Lord of Sussex keeps about him."

"Now the Lord have pity on us !" said the young courtier to himself. "Good hearts, the Earl hath many a one round him ; but good heads are scarce with us—and he himself is too ill to give direction. And Blount will be at his morning meal of Yarmouth herrings and ale ; and Tracy will have his beastly black puddings and Rhenish ;—those thorough-paced Welshmen, Thomas ap Rice and Evan Evans, will be at work on their leek porridge and toasted cheese—and she detests, they say, all coarse meats, evil smells, and strong wines. Could they but think of burning some rosemary in the great hall ! but *vogue la galère*, all must now be trusted to chance. Luck hath done indifferent well for me this morning, for I trust I have spoiled a cloak and made a court fortune—May she do as much for my gallant patron !"

The royal barge soon stopped at Deptford, and, amid the loud shouts of the populace, which her presence never failed to excite, the Queen, with a canopy borne over her head, walked, accompanied by her retinue, towards Say's Court, where the distant acclamations of the people gave the first notice of her arrival. Sussex was infinitely surprised at learning her immediate approach—not that the Queen's custom of visiting her more distinguished nobility, whether in health or sickness, could be unknown to him ; but the suddenness of the communication left no time for those preparations with which he well knew Elizabeth loved to be greeted, and the rudeness and confusion of his military household, much increased by his late illness, rendered him altogether unprepared for her reception.

Cursing internally the chance which thus brought her gracious visitation on him unaware, he hastened down with Tressilian, to whose eventful and interesting story he had just given an attentive ear.

"My worthy friend," he said, "such support as I can give your accusation of Varney, you have a right to expect alike from justice and gratitude. Chance will presently show whether I can do aught with our Sovereign, or whether, in very deed, my meddling in your affair may not rather prejudice than serve you."

Thus spoke Sussex, while hastily casting around him a loose robe of sables, and adjusting his person in the best manner he could to meet the eye of his Sovereign. But no hurried attention bestowed on his apparel could remove the ghastly effects of long illness on a countenance which nature had marked with features rather strong than pleasing. Besides, he was of low stature, and though broad-shouldered, athletic, and fit for martial achievements, his presence in a peaceful hall was not such as ladies love to look upon; a personal disadvantage, which was supposed to give Sussex, though esteemed and honoured by his Sovereign, considerable disadvantage when compared with Leicester, who was alike remarkable for elegance of manners and for beauty of person.

The Earl's utmost despatch only enabled him to meet the Queen as she entered the great hall, and he at once perceived there was a cloud on her brow. Her jealous eye had noticed the martial array of armed gentlemen and retainers with which the mansion-house was filled, and her first words expressed her disapprobation—"Is this a royal garrison, my Lord of Sussex, that it holds so many pikes and calivers? or have we by accident overshot Say's Court, and landed at our Tower of London?"

Lord Sussex hastened to offer some apology.

"It needs not," she said. "My lord, we intend speedily to take up a certain quarrel between your lordship and another great lord of our household, and at the same time to reprehend this uncivilised and dangerous practice of surrounding yourselves with armed, and even with ruffianly followers, as if, in the neighbourhood of our capital, nay, in the very verge of our royal residence, you were preparing to wage civil war with each other. We are glad to see you so well recovered, my lord."

Sussex could only bow and express his acquiescence. He then entreated her to remain till refreshment could be offered;

but in this he could not prevail. And after a few compliments of a much colder and more commonplace character than might have been expected from a step so decidedly favourable as a personal visit, the Queen took her leave of Say's Court, having brought confusion thither along with her, and leaving doubt and apprehension behind.

XII

"I AM ordered to attend court to-morrow," said Leicester, speaking to Varney, "to meet, as they surmise, my Lord of Sussex. The Queen intends to take up matters betwixt us. This comes of her visit to Say's Court, of which you must needs speak so lightly."

"I maintain it was nothing," said Varney; "nay, I know from a sure intelligencer, who was within ear shot of much that was said, that Sussex has lost rather than gained by that visit. The Queen said, when she stepped into the boat, that Say's Court looked like a guard-house, and smelt like an hospital. 'Like a cook's shop in Ram's Alley, rather,' said the Countess of Rutland, who is ever your lordship's good friend. And then my Lord of Lincoln must needs put in his holy oar, and say, that my Lord of Sussex must be excused for his rude and old-world housekeeping, since he had as yet no wife."

"And what said the Queen?" asked Leicester hastily.

"She took him up roundly," said Varney, "and asked what my Lord Sussex had to do with a wife, or my Lord Bishop to speak on such a subject. If marriage is permitted, she said, I nowhere read that it is enjoined."

"She likes not marriage, or speech of marriage, among churchmen," said Leicester.

"Nor among courtiers neither," said Varney; but observing that Leicester changed countenance, he instantly added, "that all the ladies who were present had joined in ridiculing Lord Sussex's housekeeping, and in contrasting it with the reception her Grace would have assuredly received at my Lord of Leicester's."

"You have gathered much tidings," said Leicester, "but you have forgotten or omitted the most important of all. She hath added another to those dangling satellites, whom it is her pleasure to keep revolving around her."

"Your lordship meaneth that Raleigh, the Devonshire youth," said Varney, "the Knight of the Cloak, as they call him at court?"

"He may be Knight of the Garter one day, for aught I know," said Leicester, "for he advances rapidly—She hath cap'd verses with him, and such fooleries. I would gladly abandon, of my own free will, the part I have in her fickle favour; but I will not be elbowed out of it by the clown

Sussex, or this new upstart. I hear Tressilian is with Sussex also, and high in his favour—I would spare him for considerations, but he will thrust himself on his fate—Sussex, too, is almost as well as ever in his health."

"My lord," replied Varney, "there will be rubs in the smoothest road, specially when it leads up hill. Sussex's illness was to us a god-send, from which I hoped much. He has recovered indeed, but he is not now more formidable than ere he fell ill, when he received more than one foil in wrestling with your lordship. Let not your heart fail you, my lord, and all shall be well."

"My heart never failed me, sir," replied Leicester.

"No, my lord," said Varney; "but it has betrayed you right often. He that would climb a tree, my lord, must grasp by the branches, not by the blossom."

"Well, well, well!" said Leicester impatiently; "I understand thy meaning—My heart shall neither fail me nor seduce me. Have my retinue in order—see that their array be so splendid as to put down not only the rude companions of Ratcliffe, but the retainers of every other nobleman and courtier. Let them be well armed withal, but without any outward display of their weapons, wearing them as if more for fashion's sake than for us. Do thou thyself keep close to me, I may have business for you."

The preparations of Sussex and his party were not less anxious than those of Leicester.

"Thy Supplication, impeaching Varney of seduction," said the Earl to Tressilian, "is by this time in the Queen's hand—I have sent it through a sure channel. Methinks your suit should succeed, being, as it is, founded in justice and honour, and Elizabeth being the very muster of both. This is the time and the hour to accumulate every charge against Leicester and his household, and yours the Queen will hold a heavy one. But at all events she hath the complaint before her."

Tressilian could not help suspecting that, in his eagerness to strengthen himself against his rival, Sussex had purposely adopted the course most likely to throw odium on Leicester, without considering minutely whether it were the mode of proceeding most likely to be attended with success. But the step was irrevocable, and Sussex escaped from farther discussing it by dismissing his company, with the command, "Let all be in order at eleven o'clock; I must be at court and in the presence by high noon precisely."

While the rival statesmen were thus anxiously preparing for their approaching meeting in the Queen's presence, even Elizabeth herself was not without apprehension of what might chance from the collision of two such fiery spirits, each backed by a strong and numerous body of followers, and dividing betwixt them, either openly or in secret, the hopes and wishes of most of her court. The band of Gentlemen Pensioners were all under arms, and a reinforcement of the yeomen of the guard was brought down the Thames from London. A royal proclamation was sent forth, strictly prohibiting nobles, of whatever degree, to approach the Palace with retainers or followers, armed with short or with long weapons; and it was even whispered, that the High Sheriff of Kent had secret instructions to have a part of the array of the county ready on the shortest notice.

The eventful hour, thus anxiously prepared for on all sides, at length approached, and, each followed by his long and glittering train of friends and followers, the rival Earls entered the Palace-yard of Greenwich at noon precisely.

As if by previous arrangement, or perhaps by intimation that such was the Queen's pleasure, Sussex and his retinue came to the Palace from Deptford by water, while Leicester arrived by land; and thus they entered the courtyard from opposite sides. This trifling circumstance gave Leicester a certain ascendency in the opinion of the vulgar, the appearance of his cavalcade of mounted followers showing more numerous and more imposing than those of Sussex's party, who were necessarily upon foot. No show or sign of greeting passed between the Earls, though each looked full at the other, both expecting perhaps an exchange of courtesies, which neither was willing to commence. Almost in the minute of their arrival the castle-bell tolled, the gates of the Palace were opened, and the Earls entered, each numerously attended by such gentlemen of their train whose rank gave them that privilege. The yeomen and inferior attendants remained in the courtyard, where the opposite parties eyed each other with looks of eager hatred and scorn, as if waiting with impatience for some cause of tumult, or some apology for mutual aggression. But they were restrained by the strict commands of their leaders, and overawed, perhaps, by the presence of an armed guard of unusual strength.

In the meanwhile, the more distinguished persons of each train followed their patrons into the lofty halls and antechambers of the royal Palace, flowing on in the same current, like two streams which are compelled into the same channel, yet shun to mix their waters. The parties arranged themselves, as it were instinctively, on the different sides of the lofty apartment, and seemed eager to escape from the transient union which the narrowness of the crowded entrance had for an instant compelled them to submit to. The folding doors at the upper end of the long gallery were immediately afterwards opened, and it was announced in a whisper that the Queen was in her presence-chamber, to which these gave access. Both Earls moved slowly and stately towards the entrance; Sussex followed by Tressilian, Blount, and Raleigh, and Leicester by Varney. The pride of Leicester was obliged to give way to court forms, and with a grave and formal inclination of the head, he paused until his rival, a peer of older creation than his own, passed before him. Sussex returned the reverence with the same formal civility, and entered the presence-room. Tressilian and Blount offered to follow him, but were not permitted, the Usher of the Black Rod alleging in excuse that he had precise orders to look to all admissions that day. To Raleigh, who stood back on the repulse of his companions, he said, "You, sir, may enter," and he entered accordingly.

"Follow me close, Varney," said the Earl of Leicester, who had stood aloof for a moment to mark the reception of Sussex; and, advancing to the entrance, he was about to pass on, when Varney, who was close behind him, dressed out in the utmost bravery of the day, was stopped by the usher, as Tressilian and Blount had been before him. "How is this, Master Bowyer?" said the Earl of Leicester. "Know you who I am, and that this is my friend and follower?"

"Your lordship will pardon me," replied Bowyer, stoutly; "my orders are precise, and limit me to a strict discharge of my duty."

"Thou art a partial knave," said Leicester, the blood mounting to his face, "to do me this dishonour, when you but now admitted a follower of my Lord of Sussex."

"My lord," said Bowyer, "Master Raleigh is newly admitted a sworn servant of her Grace, and to him my orders did not apply."

"Thou art a knave—an ungrateful knave," said Leicester; "but he that hath done, can undo—thou shalt not prank thee in thy authority long."

This threat he uttered aloud, with less than his usual policy and discretion, and having done so, he entered the presence-chamber, and made his reverence to the Queen, who, attired with even more than her usual splendour, and surrounded by those nobles and statesmen whose courage and wisdom have rendered her reign immortal, stood ready to receive the homage of her subjects. She graciously returned the obeisance of the favourite Earl, and looked alternately at him and at Sussex, as if about to speak, when Bowyer, a man whose spirit could not brook the insult he had so openly received from Leicester, in the discharge of his office, advanced with his black rod in his hand, and knelt down before her.

"Why, how now, Bowyer?" said Elizabeth, "thy courtesy seems strangely timed!"

"My Liege Sovereign," he said, while every courtier around trembled at his audacity, "I come but to ask, whether, in the discharge of my office, I am to obey your Highness' commands, or those of the Earl of Leicester, who has publicly menaced me with his displeasure, and treated me with disparaging terms, because I denied entry to one of his followers, in obedience to your Grace's precise orders."

The spirit of Henry VIII. was instantly aroused in the bosom of his daughter, and she turned on Leicester with a severity which appalled him, as well as all his followers.

"God's death, my lord," such was her emphatic phrase, "what means this? We have thought well of you, and brought you near to our person; but it was not that you might hide the sun from our faithful subjects. Who gave you licence to contradict our orders, or control our offices? I will have in this court, ay, and in this realm, but one mistress, and no master. Look to it that Master Bowyer sustains no harm for his duty to me faithfully discharged; for, as I am Christian woman and crowned Queen, I will hold you dearly answerable.—Go, Bowyer, you have done the part of an honest man and a true subject. We will brook no mayor of the palace here."

Bowyer kissed the hand which she extended towards him, and withdrew to his post, astonished at the success of his own audacity. A smile of triumph pervaded the faction of Sussex; that of Leicester seemed proportionally dismayed, and the favourite himself, assuming an aspect of the deepest humility, did not even attempt a word in his own exculpation.

He acted wisely; for it was the policy of Elizabeth to humble, not to disgrace him, and it was prudent to suffer her, without opposition or reply, to glory in the exertion of her authority. The dignity of the Queen was gratified, and the woman began soon to feel for the mortification which she had imposed on her favourite. Her keen eye also observed the secret looks of congratulation exchanged amongst those who favoured Sussex, and it was no part of her policy to give either party a decisive triumph.

"What I say to my Lord of Leicester," she said, after a moment's pause, "I say also to you, my Lord of Sussex. You also must needs ruffle in the court of England, at the head of a faction of your own?"

"My followers, gracious Princess," said Sussex, "have indeed ruffled in your cause, in Ireland, in Scotland, and against yonder rebellious Earls in the north. I am ignorant that——"

"Do you bandy looks and words with me, my lord?" said the Queen, interrupting him; "methinks you might learn of my Lord of Leicester the modesty to be silent, at least, under our censure. I say, my lord, that my grandfather and father, in their wisdom, debarred the nobles of this civilised land from travelling with such disorderly retinues; and think you that because I wear a coif, their sceptre has in my hand been changed into a distaff? I tell you, no king in Christendom will less brook his court to be cumbered, his people oppressed, and his kingdom's peace disturbed by the arrogance of overgrown power, than she who now speaks with you.—My Lord of Leicester, and you, my Lord of Sussex, I command you both to be friends with each other; or, by the crown I wear, you shall find an enemy who will be too strong for both of you!"

"Madam," said the Earl of Leicester, "you who are yourself the fountain of honour, know best what is due to mine. I place it at your disposal, and only say, that the terms on which I have stood with my Lord of Sussex have not been of my seeking; nor had he cause to think me his enemy, until he had done me gross wrong."

"For me, madam," said the Earl of Sussex, "I cannot appeal from your sovereign pleasure; but I were well content my Lord of Leicester should say in what I have, as he terms it, wronged him, since my tongue never spoke the word that I would not willingly justify either on foot or horseback."

"And for me," said Leicester, "always under my gracious Sovereign's pleasure, my hand shall be as ready to make good my words as that of any man who ever wrote himself Ratcliffe."

"My lords," said the Queen, "these are no terms for this presence; and if you cannot keep your temper we will find means to keep both that and you close enough. Let me see you join hands, my lords, and forget your idle animosities."

The two rivals looked at each other with reluctant eyes, each unwilling to make the first advance to execute the Queen's will.

"Sussex," said Elizabeth, "I entreat—Leicester, I command you."

Yet, so were her words accented, that the entreaty sounded like command, and the command like entreaty. They remained still and stubborn, until she raised her voice to a height which argued at once impatience and absolute command.

"Sir Henry Lee," she said, to an officer in attendance, "have a guard in present readiness, and man a barge instantly. —My Lords of Sussex and Leicester, I bid you once more to join hands—and, God's death! he that refuses shall taste of our Tower fare ere he see our face again. I will lower your proud hearts ere we part, and that I promise, on the word of a Queen."

"The prison," said Leicester, "might be borne, but to lose your Grace's presence, were to lose light and life at once.—Here, Sussex, is my hand."

"And here," said Sussex, "is mine in truth and honesty; but——"

"Nay, under favour, you shall add no more," said the Queen. "Why, this is as it should be," she added, looking on them more favourably, "and when you, the shepherds of the people, unite to protect them, it shall be well with the flock we rule over. For, my lords, I tell you plainly, your follies and your brawls lead to strange disorders among your servants.—My Lord of Leicester, you have a gentleman in your household called Varney?"

"Yes, gracious madam," replied Leicester, "I presented him to kiss your royal hand when you were last at Nonsuch."

"His outside was well enough," said the Queen, "but scarce so fair, I should have thought, as to have caused a maiden of honourable birth and hopes to barter her fame for his good looks, and become his paramour. Yet so it is—this fellow of yours hath seduced the daughter of a good old Devonshire knight, Sir Hugh Robsart of Lidcote Hall, and she hath fled with him from her father's house like a castaway. —My Lord of Leicester, are you ill, that you look so deadly pale?"

"No, gracious madam," said Leicester; and it required every effort he could make to bring forth these few words.

"You are surely ill, my lord," said Elizabeth, going towards him with hasty speech and hurried step, which indicated the deepest concern. "Call Masters—call our surgeon in ordinary—Where be these loitering fools?—We lose the pride of our court through their negligence.—Or, is it possible, Leicester, she continued, looking on him with a very gentle aspect, "can fear of my displeasure have wrought so deeply on thee? Doubt not for a moment, noble Dudley, that we could blame *thee* for the folly of thy retainer—thee, whose thoughts we know to be far otherwise employed! He that would climb the eagle's nest, my lord, cares not who are catching linnets at the foot of the precipice."

"Mark you that?" said Sussex, aside to Raleigh. "The devil aids him surely; for all that would sink another ten fathom deep, seems but to make him float the more easily. Had a follower of mine acted thus——"

"Peace, my good Lord;" said Raleigh, "for God's sake, peace. Wait the change of the tide; it is even now on the turn."

The acute observation of Raleigh, perhaps, did not deceive him; for Leicester's confusion was so great, and, indeed, for the moment, so irresistibly overwhelming, that Elizabeth, after looking at him with a wondering eye, and receiving no intelligible answer to the unusual expressions of grace and affection which had escaped from her, shot her quick glance around the circle of courtiers, and reading, perhaps, in their faces, something that accorded with her own awakened suspicions, she said suddenly, "Or is there more in this than we see—or than you, my lord, wish that we should see? Where is this Varney? Who saw him?"

"An it please your Grace," said Bowyer, "it is the same against whom I this instant closed the door of the presence-room."

"An it please me?" repeated Elizabeth, sharply, not at that moment in the humour of being pleased with anything.—"It does *not* please me that he should pass saucily into my presence, or that you should exclude from it one who came to justify himself from an accusation."

"May it please you," answered the perplexed usher, "if I knew, in such case, how to bear myself, I would take heed——"

"You should have reported the fellow's desire to us, Master Usher, and taken our directions. You think yourself a great man, because but now we chid a nobleman on your account—yet, after all, we hold you but as the lead-weight that keeps the door fast. Call this Varney hither instantly—there is one Tressilian also mentioned in this petition—let them both come before us."

She was obeyed, and Tressilian and Varney appeared accordingly. Varney's first glance was at Leicester, his second at the Queen. In the looks of the latter, there appeared an approaching storm, and in the downcast countenance of his patron, he could read no directions in what way he was to trim his vessel for the encounter—he then saw Tressilian, and at once perceived the peril of the situation in which he was placed. But Varney was as bold-faced and ready-witted as he was cunning and unscrupulous,—a skilful pilot in extremity, and fully conscious of the advantages which he would obtain, could he extricate Leicester from his present peril, and of the ruin that yawned for himself should he fail in doing so.

"Is it true, sirrah," said the Queen, with one of those searching looks which few had the audacity to resist, "that you have seduced to infamy a young lady of birth and breeding, the daughter of Sir Hugh Robsart of Lidcote Hall?"

Varney kneeled down, and replied, with a look of the most profound contrition, "There had been some love passages betwixt him and Mistress Amy Robsart."

Leicester's flesh quivered with indignation as he heard his dependant make this avowal, and for one moment he manned himself to step forward, and, bidding farewell to the court and the royal favour, confess the whole mystery of the secret marriage. But he looked at Sussex, and the idea of the triumphant smile which would clothe his cheek upon hearing the avowal, sealed his lips. "Not now, at least," he thought, "or in this presence, will I afford him so rich a triumph." And pressing his lips close together, he stood firm and collected, attentive to each word which Varney uttered, and determined to hide to the last the secret on which his court-favour seemed to depend. Meanwhile, the Queen proceeded in her examination of Varney.

"Love passages!" said she, echoing his last words; "what passages, thou knave? and why not ask the wench's hand from her father, if thou hadst any honesty in thy love for her?"

"An it please your Grace," said Varney, still on his knees, "I dared not do so, for her father had promised her hand to a gentleman of birth and honour—I will do him justice, though I know he bears me ill will—one Master Edmund Tressilian, whom I now see in the presence."

"Soh!" replied the Queen; "and what was your right to make the simple fool break her worthy father's contract, through your love *passages*, as your conceit and assurance term them?"

"Madam," replied Varney, "it is in vain to plead the cause of human frailty before a judge to whom it is unknown, or that of love, to one who never yields to the passion"—He paused an instant, and then added, in a very low and timid tone, "which she inflicts upon all others."

Elizabeth tried to frown, but smiled in her own despite, as she answered, "Thou art a marvellously impudent knave—Art thou married to the girl?"

Leicester's feelings became so complicated and so painfully intense, that it seemed to him as if his life was to depend on the answer made by Varney, who, after a moment's real hesitation, answered, "Yes."

"Thou false villain!" said Leicester, bursting forth into rage, yet unable to add another word to the sentence, which he had begun with such emphatic passion.

"Nay, my lord," said the Queen, "we will, by your leave, stand between this fellow and your anger. We have not yet done with him.—Knew your master, my Lord of Leicester, of this fair work of yours? Speak truth, I command thee, and I will be thy warrant from danger on every quarter."

"Gracious madam," said Varney, "to speak heaven's truth, my lord was the cause of the whole matter. I am compelled to own that some deep, overwhelming, yet secret feeling, hath of late dwelt in my lord's mind, hath abstracted him from the cares of the household, which he was wont to govern with such religious strictness, and hath left us opportunities to do follies, of which the shame, as in this case, partly falls upon our patron. Without this, I had not had means or leisure to commit the folly which has drawn on me his displeasure, the heaviest to endure by me, which I could by any means incur,—saving always the yet more dreaded resentment of your Grace."

"And in this sense, and no other, hath he been accessory to thy fault?" said Elizabeth.

"Surely, madam, in no other," replied Varney; "but since somewhat hath chanced to him, he can scarce be called his own man. Look at him, madam, how pale and trembling he stands—how unlike his usual majesty of manner—yet what has he to fear from aught I can say to your Highness? Ah! madam, since he received that fatal packet!"

"What packet, and from whence?" said the Queen, eagerly.

"From whence, madam, I cannot guess; but I am so near to his person, that I know he has ever since worn, suspended around his neck, and next to his heart, that lock of hair which sustains a small golden jewel shaped like a heart—he speaks to it when alone—he parts not from it when he sleeps—no heathen ever worshipped an idol with such devotion."

"Thou art a prying knave to watch thy master so closely," said Elizabeth, blushing, but not with anger; "and a tattling knave to tell over again his fooleries.—What colour might the braid of hair be that thou pratest of?"

Varney replied, "A poet, madam, might call it a thread from the golden web wrought by Minerva; but, to my thinking, it was paler than even the purest gold—more like the last parting sunbeam of the softest day of spring."

"Why, you are a poet yourself, Master Varney," said the Queen, smiling; "but I have not genius quick enough to follow your rare metaphors—Look round these ladies—is there"—(she hesitated, and endeavoured to assume an air of great indifference)—"Is there here, in this presence, any lady, the colour of whose hair reminds thee of that braid? Methinks, without prying into my Lord of Leicester's amorous secrets, I would fain know what kind of locks are like the thread of Minerva's web, or the—what was it?—the last rays of the Mayday sun."

Varney looked round the presence-chamber, his eye travelling from one lady to another, until at length it rested upon the Queen herself, but with an aspect of the deepest veneration. "I see no tresses," he said, "in this presence, worthy of such similes, unless where I dare not look on them."

"How, sir knave," said the Queen, "dare you intimate——"

"Nay, madam," replied Varney, shading his eyes with his hand, "it was the beams of the Mayday sun that dazzled my weak eyes."

"Go to—go to," said the Queen; "thou art a foolish fellow"—and turning quickly from him she walked up to Leicester.

Intense curiosity, mingled with all the various hopes, fears, and passions, which influence court faction, had occupied the presence-chamber during the Queen's conference with Varney, as if with the strength of an Eastern talisman. The atmosphere was contagious, and Leicester, who saw all around wishing or fearing his advancement or his fall, forgot all that love had previously dictated, and saw nothing for the instant but the favour or disgrace, which depended on the nod of Elizabeth and the fidelity of Varney. The mingled emotions which had at first overcome him, had now given way to the energetic vigour with which he had determined to support his place in the Queen's favour; and never did he seem to Elizabeth more eloquent, more handsome, more interesting, than while, kneeling at her feet, he conjured her to strip him of all his power, but to leave him the name of her servant.—"Take from the poor Dudley," he exclaimed, "all that your bounty has made him, and bid him be the poor gentleman he was when your Grace first shone on him; leave him no more than his cloak and his sword, but let him still boast he has—what in word or deed he never forfeited—the regard of his adored Queen and mistress!"

"No, Dudley!" said Elizabeth, raising him with one hand, while she extended the other that he might kiss it; "Elizabeth hath not forgotten that, whilst you were a poor gentleman, despoiled of your hereditary rank, she was as poor a princess, and that in her cause you then ventured all that oppression had left you,—your life and honour.—Rise, my lord, and let my hand go!—Rise, and be what you have ever been, the grace of our court, and the support of our throne. Your mistress may be forced to chide your misdemeanours, but never without owning your merits.—And so help me God," she added, turning to the audience, who with various feelings witnessed this interesting scene,—"So help me God, gentlemen, as I think never sovereign had a truer servant than I have in this noble Earl!"

A murmur of assent rose from the Leicesterian faction, which the friends of Sussex dared not oppose. They remained with their eyes fixed on the ground, dismayed as well as mortified by the public and absolute triumph of their opponents. Leicester's first use of the familiarity to which the Queen had so publicly restored him was to ask her commands concerning Varney's offence. "Although," he said, "the fellow deserves nothing from me but displeasure, yet, might I presume to intercede——"

"In truth, we had forgotten his matter," said the Queen; "and it was ill done of us, who owe justice to our meanest, as well as to our highest subject. We are pleased, my lord, that you were the first to recall the matter to our memory.—Where is Tressilian, the accuser?—let him come before us."

Tressilian appeared, and made a low and beseeming reverence. His person, as we have elsewhere observed, had an air of grace and even of nobleness, which did not escape Queen Elizabeth's critical observation. She looked at him with attention, as he stood before her unabashed, but with an air of the deepest dejection.

"I cannot but grieve for this gentleman," she said to Leicester. "I have inquired concerning him, and his presence confirms what I heard, that he is a scholar and a soldier, well accomplished both in arts and arms. We women, my lord, are fanciful in our choice—I had said now, to judge by the eye, there was no comparison to be held betwixt your follower and this gentleman. But Varney is a well-spoken fellow, and, to say truth, that goes far with us of the weaker sex. Look you, Master Tressilian, a bolt lost is not a bow broken. Forget, good sir, this Lady Light-o'-Love—teach your affection to see with a wiser eye. For this dame's father, we can make his grief the less, by advancing his son-in-law to such station as may enable him to give an honourable support to his bride. Thou shalt not be forgotten thyself, Tressilian—follow our court, and thou shalt see that a true Troilus hath some claim in our grace." She then paused a minute, and resumed in a milder tone, "I must do justice betwixt the bold and mutinous knaves notwithstanding.—My Lord of Leicester, will you warrant with your honour—that is to the best of your belief—that your servant speaks truth in saying he hath married this Amy Robsart?"

This was a home thrust, and had nearly staggered Leicester. But he had now gone too far to recede, and answered, after a moment's hesitation, "To the best of my belief—indeed on my certain knowledge—she is a wedded wife."

"Gracious madam," said Tressilian, "may I yet request to know when and under what circumstances this alleged marriage——"

"Out, sirrah," answered the Queen; "*alleged* marriage! Have you not the word of this illustrious Earl to warrant the truth of what his servant says? But thou art a loser—think'st thyself such at least—and thou shalt have indulgence—we will look into the matter ourself more at leisure.—My Lord of Leicester, I trust you remember we mean to taste the good cheer of your castle of Kenilworth on this week ensuing—we will pray you to bid our good and valued friend the Earl of Sussex to hold company with us there."

"If the noble Earl of Sussex," said Leicester, bowing to his rival with the easiest and with the most graceful courtesy, "will so far honour my poor house, I will hold it an additional proof of the amicable regard it is your Grace's desire we should entertain towards each other."

Sussex was more embarrassed.—"I should," said he, "madam, be but a clog on your gayer hours since my late severe illness."

"And have you been indeed so very ill?" said Elizabeth, looking on him with more attention than before; "you are in faith strangely altered, and deeply am I grieved to see it. But be of good cheer—we will ourselves look after the health of so valued a servant, and to whom we owe so much. But we will break up their further conference at present.—My Lords of Sussex and Leicester, we have a word more with you. Tressilian and Varney are near your persons—you will see that they attend you at Kenilworth—And as we shall then have both Paris and Menelaus within our call, so we will have this same fair Helen also, whose fickleness has caused this broil. Varney, thy wife must be at Kenilworth, and forthcoming at my order.—My Lord of Leicester, we expect you will look to this."

The Earl and his follower bowed low, and raised their heads, without daring to look at the Queen, or at each other; for both felt at the instant as if the nets and toils which their own falsehood had woven, were in the act of closing around them. The Queen, however, observed not their confusion, but proceeded to say, "My Lords of Sussex and Leicester, we require your presence at the privy council to be presently held, where matters of importance are to be debated. We will then take the water for our divertissement, and you, my lords, will attend us.—And that reminds us of a circumstance—Do you, Sir Squire of the Soiled Cassock" (distinguishing Raleigh by a smile), "fail not to observe that you are to attend us on our progress. You shall be supplied with suitable means to reform your wardrobe."

And so terminated this celebrated audience, in which, as throughout her life, Elizabeth united the occasional caprice of her sex, with that sense and sound policy, in which neither man nor woman ever excelled her.

XIII

DURING the brief interval that took place betwixt the dismissal of the audience and the sitting of the privy council, Leicester had time to reflect that he had that morning sealed his own fate. "It was impossible for him now," he thought, "after having, in the face of all that was honourable in England, pledged his truth (though in an ambiguous phrase) for the statement of Varney, to contradict or disavow it, without exposing himself not merely to the loss of court favour, but to the highest displeasure of the Queen, his deceived mistress, and to the scorn and contempt at once of his rival and of all his compeers." This certainly rushed at once on his mind, together with all the difficulties which he would necessarily be exposed to in preserving a secret, which seemed now equally essential to his safety, to his power, and to his honour. He was situated like one who walks upon ice, ready to give way around him, and whose only safety consists in moving onwards, by firm and unvacillating steps. The Queen's favour, to preserve which he had made such sacrifices, must now be secured by all means and at all hazards—it was the only plank which he could cling to in the tempest. He must settle himself, therefore, to the task of not only preserving, but augmenting, the Queen's partiality—He must be the favourite of Elizabeth, or a man utterly shipwrecked in fortune and in honour. All other considerations must be laid aside for the moment, and he repelled the intrusive thoughts which forced on his mind the image of Amy, by saying to himself, there would be time to think hereafter how he was to escape from the labyrinth ultimately, since the pilot, who sees a Scylla under his bows, must not for the time think of the more distant dangers of Charybdis.

Never was more anxious and ready way made for "my Lord of Leicester," than as he passed through the crowded ante-rooms to go towards the riverside, in order to attend her Majesty to her barge—Never was the voice of the ushers louder, to "make room—make room for the noble Earl"—Never were these signals more promptly and reverentially obeyed—Never were more anxious eyes turned on him to obtain a glance of favour, or even of mere recognition, while the heart of many an humble follower throbbed betwixt the desire to offer his congratulations, and the fear of intruding himself on the notice of one so infinitely above him. The whole court considered the issue of this day's audience, expected with so much doubt and anxiety, as a decisive triumph on the part of Leicester, and felt assured that the orb of his rival satellite, if not altogether obscured by his lustre, must revolve hereafter in a dimmer and more distant sphere. So thought the court and courtiers, from high to low, and they acted accordingly.

On the other hand, never did Leicester return the general greeting with such ready and condescending courtesy, or endeavour more successfully to gather (in the words of one, who at that moment stood at no great distance from him) "golden opinions from all sorts of men."

For all the favourite Earl had a bow, a smile at least, and often a kind word. Most of these were addressed to courtiers, whose names have long gone down the tide of oblivion; but some, to such as sound strangely in our ears, when connected with the ordinary matters of human life, above which the gratitude of posterity has long elevated them.

Then the Earl was approached, with several fantastic congees, by a person quaintly dressed in a doublet of black velvet, curiously slashed and pinked with crimson satin. A long cock's feather in the velvet bonnet, which he held in his hand, and an enormous ruff, stiffened to the extremity of the absurd taste of the times, joined with a sharp, lively, conceited expression of countenance, seemed to body forth a vain, harebrained coxcomb, and small wit; while the rod he held, and an assumption of royal authority, appeared to express some sense of official consequence, which qualified the natural pertness of his manner. A perpetual blush, which occupied rather the sharp nose than the thin cheek of this personage, seemed to speak more of "good life," as it was called, than of modesty; and the manner in which he approached to the Earl confirmed that suspicion.

"Good even to you, Master Robert Lancham," said Leicester, and seemed desirous to pass forward without further speech.

"I have a suit to your noble lordship," said the figure, boldly following him.

"And what is it, good master keeper of the council-chamber door?"

"*Clerk* of the council-chamber door," said Master Robert Lancham, with emphasis, by way of reply, and of correction.

"Well, qualify thine office as thou wilt, man," replied the Earl; "what wouldst thou have with *me*?"

"Simply," answered Lancham, "that your lordship would be, as heretofore, my good lord, and procure me licence to attend the Summer Progress unto your lordship's most beautiful and all-to-be-unmatched Castle of Kenilworth."

"To what purpose, good Master Laneham?" replied the Earl; "bethink you my guests must needs be many."

"Not so many," replied the petitioner, "but that your nobleness will willingly spare your old servitor his crib and his mess. Bethink you, my lord, how necessary is this rod of mine, to fright away all those listeners, who else would play at bo-peep with the honourable council, and be searching for key-holes and crannies in the door of the chamber, so as to render my staff as needful as a fly-flap in a butcher's shop."

"Methinks you have found out a fly-blown comparison for the honourable council, Master Laneham," said the Earl; "but seek not about to justify it. Come to Kenilworth, if you list; there will be store of fools there besides, and so you will be fitted."

"Nay, an there be fools, my lord," replied Laneham, with much glee, "I warrant I will make sport among them; for no greyhound loves to cote a hare, as I turn and course a fool. But I have another singular favour to beseech of your honour."

"Speak it, and let me go," said the Earl; "I think the Queen comes forth instantly."

"My very good lord, I would fain bring a bed-fellow with me."

"How, you irreverent rascal?" said Leicester.

"Nay, my lord, my meaning was within the canons," answered his unblushing, or rather his ever-blushing petitioner. "I have a wife as curious as her grandmother, who ate the apple. Now, take her with me I may not, her Highness's orders being so strict against the officers bringing with them their wives in a progress, and so lumbering the court with womankind. But what I would crave of your lordship is, to find room for her in some mummery, or pretty pageant, in disguise, as it were; so that, not being known for my wife, there may be no offence."

"The foul fiend seize ye both!" said Leicester, stung into uncontrollable passion by the recollection which this speech excited—"Why stop you me with such follies?"

The terrified clerk of the chamber-door, astonished at the burst of resentment he had so unconsciously produced, dropped his staff of office from his hand, and gazed on the incensed Earl with a foolish face of wonder and terror, which instantly recalled Leicester to himself.

"I meant but to try if thou hadst the audacity which befits thine office," said he hastily. "Come to Kenilworth, and bring the devil with thee, if thou wilt."

"My wife, sir, hath played the devil ere now, in a Mystery in Queen Mary's time—but we shall want a trifle for properties."

"Here is a crown for thee," said the Earl,—"make me rid of thee—the great bell rings."

Master Robert Laneham stared a moment at the agitation which he had excited, and then said to himself, as he stooped to pick up his staff of office, "The noble Earl runs wild humours to-day; but they who give crowns, expect us witty fellows to wink at their unsettled starts; and, by my faith, if they paid not for mercy, we would finger them tightly!"

When they returned to the palace, Elizabeth accepted, or rather selected, the arm of Leicester, to support her from the stairs where they landed to the great gate. His rival, indeed, was repeatedly graced by the Queen's notice; but it was in a manner that seemed to flow less from spontaneous inclination, than as extorted by a sense of his merit. And, in the opinion of many experienced courtiers, all the favour she showed him was overbalanced, by her whispering in the ear of the Lady Derby, that "now she saw sickness was a better alchemist than she before wotted of, seeing it had changed my lord of Sussex's copper nose into a golden one."

The jest transpired, and the Earl of Leicester enjoyed his triumph, as one to whom court favour has been both the primary and the ultimate motive of life, while he forgot, in the intoxication of the moment, the perplexities and dangers of his own situation. Indeed, strange as it may appear, he thought less at that moment of the perils arising from his secret union, than of the marks of grace which Elizabeth from time to time showed to young Raleigh. They were indeed transient, but they were conferred on one accomplished in mind and body, with grace, gallantry, literature, and valour. An accident occurred in the course of the evening which rivetted Leicester's attention to this object.

The nobles and courtiers who had attended the Queen on her pleasure expedition, were invited, with royal hospitality, to a splendid banquet in the hall of the palace. The table was not, indeed, graced by the presence of the Sovereign; for, agreeable to her idea of what was at once modest and dignified, the Maiden Queen, on such occasions, was wont to take in private, or with one or two favourite ladies, her light and temperate meal. After a moderate interval, the court again met in the splendid gardens of the palace; and it was while thus engaged, that the Queen suddenly asked a lady, who was near to her both in place and favour, what had become of the young Squire Lack-Cloak.

The Lady Paget answered, "She had seen Mr. Raleigh but two or three minutes since, standing at the window of a small pavilion or pleasure-house, which looked out on the Thames, and writing on the glass with a diamond ring."

"That ring," said the Queen, "was a small token I gave him, to make amends for his spoiled mantle. Come, Paget, let us see what use he has made of it, for I can see through him already. He is a marvellously sharp-witted spirit."

They went to the spot, within sight of which, but at some distance, the young cavalier still lingered, as the fowler watches the net which he has set. The Queen approached the window, on which Raleigh had used her gift to inscribe the following line:

"Fain would I climb, but that I fear to fall."

The Queen smiled, read it twice over, once with deliberation to Lady Paget, and once again to herself. "It is a pretty beginning," she said, after the consideration of a moment or two; "but methinks the muse hath deserted the young wit, at the very outset of his task. It were good-natured—were it not, Lady Paget—to complete it for him? Try your rhyming faculties."

Lady Paget, prosaic from her cradle upwards, as ever any lady of the bedchamber before or after her, disclaimed all possibility of assisting the young poet.

"Nay, then, we must sacrifice to the Muses ourselves," said Elizabeth.

"The incense of no one can be more acceptable," said Lady Paget; "and your Highness will impose such obligation on the ladies of Parnassus——"

"Hush, Paget," said the Queen, "you speak sacrilege against the immortal Nine—yet, virgins themselves, they should be exorable to a Virgin Queen—and therefore—let me see how runs his verse—

'Fain would I climb, but that I fear to fall.'

Might not the answer (for fault of a better) run thus?—

'If thy mind fail thee, do not climb at all.'

The dame of honour uttered an exclamation of joy and surprise at so happy a termination; and certainly a worse has been applauded, even when coming from a less distinguished author.

The Queen, thus encouraged, took off a diamond ring, and saying, "We will give this gallant some cause of marvel, when he finds his couplet perfected without his own interference," she wrote her own line beneath that of Raleigh.

The Queen left the pavilion—but retiring slowly, and often looking back, she could see the young cavalier steal, with the flight of a lapwing, towards the place where he had seen her make a pause; "She stayed but to observe," as she said, "that her train had taken"; and then, laughing at the circumstance with the Lady Paget, she took the way slowly towards the palace. Elizabeth, as they returned, cautioned her companion not to mention to any one the aid which she had given to the young poet—and Lady Paget promised scrupulous secrecy. It is to be supposed, that she made a mental reservation in favour of Leicester, to whom her ladyship transmitted without delay an anecdote so little calculated to give him pleasure.

Raleigh, in the meanwhile, stole back to the window, and read, with a feeling of intoxication, the encouragement thus given him by the Queen in person to follow out his ambitious career, and returned to Sussex and his retinue, then on the point of embarking to go up the river, his heart beating high with gratified pride, and with hope of future distinction.

The reverence due to the person of the Earl prevented any notice being taken of the reception he had met with at court, until they had landed, and the household were assembled in the great hall at Say's Court; while that lord, exhausted by his late illness, and the fatigues of the day, had retired to his chamber, demanding the attendance of Wayland, his successful physician. Wayland, however, was nowhere to be found; and, while some of the party were, with military impatience, seeking him, and cursing his absence, the rest flocked around Raleigh, to congratulate him on his prospects of court favour.

He had the good taste and judgment to conceal the decisive circumstance of the couplet, to which Elizabeth had deigned to find a rhyme; but other circumstances had transpired which plainly intimated that he had made some progress in the Queen's favour. All hastened to wish him joy on the mended appearance of his fortune; some from real regard, some, perhaps, from hopes that his preferment might hasten their own; and most from a mixture of these motives, and a sense that the countenance shown to any one of Sussex's household, was in fact a triumph to the whole. Raleigh returned the kindest thanks to them all, disowning, with becoming modesty, that one day's fair reception made a favourite, any more than one swallow a summer. But he observed that Blount did not join in the general congratulation, and, somewhat hurt at his apparent unkindness, he plainly asked him the reason.

Blount replied with equal sincerity—"My good Walter, I wish thee as well as do any of these chattering gulls, who are whistling and whooping gratulations in thine ear, because it seems fair weather with thee. But I fear for thee, Walter" (and he wiped his honest eye), "I fear for thee with all my heart. These court tricks, and gambols, and flashes of fine women's favour, are the tricks and trinkets that bring fair fortunes to farthings, and fine faces and witty coxcombs to the acquaintance of dull block and sharp axes."

So saying, Blount arose and left the hall, while Raleigh looked after him with an expression that blanked for a moment his bold and animated countenance.

Stanley just then entered the hall, and said to Tressilian, "My lord is calling for your fellow Wayland, and your fellow Wayland is just come hither in a sculler, and is calling for you, nor will he go to my lord till he sees you. The fellow looks as he were mazed methinks—I would you would see him immediately."

Tressilian instantly left the hall, and causing Wayland Smith to be shown into a withdrawing apartment, and lights placed, he conducted the artist thither, and was surprised when he observed the emotion of his countenance.

"What is the matter with you, Smith?" said Tressilian; "have you seen the devil?"

"Worse, sir, worse," replied Wayland, "I have seen a basilisk. Thank God, I saw him first, for being so seen, and seeing not me, he will do the less harm."

"In God's name, speak sense," said Tressilian, "and say what you mean!"

"I have seen my old master," said the artist—"Last night, a friend, whom I had acquired, took me to see the palace clock, judging me to be curious in such works of art. At the window of a turret next to the clock-house I saw my old master."

"Thou must have needs been mistaken," said Tressilian.

"I was not mistaken," said Wayland—"He that once hath his features by heart would know him amongst a million. He was anticly habited; but he cannot disguise himself from me, God be praised, as I can from him. I will not, however, tempt Providence by remaining within his ken. Tarleton the player himself could not so disguise himself, but that, sooner or later, Doboobie would find him out. I must away tomorrow; for, as we stand together, it were death to me to remain within reach of him."

"But the Earl of Sussex?" said Tressilian.

"He is in little danger from what he has hitherto taken, provided he swallow the matter of a bean's size of the Orvietan every morning fasting—but let him beware of a relapse."

"And how is that to be guarded against?" said Tressilian.

"Only by such caution as you would use against the devil," answered Wayland. "Let my lord's clerk of the kitchen kill his lord's meat himself, and dress it himself, using no spice but what he procures from the surest hands—Let the sewer serve it up himself, and let the master of my lord's household see that both clerk and sewer taste the dishes which the one dresses and the other serves. Let my lord use no perfumes which come not from well accredited persons; no unguents—no pomades. Let him on no account drink with strangers, or eat fruit with them, either in the way of nooning or otherwise. Especially, let him observe such caution if he goes to Kenilworth—the excuse of his illness, and his being under diet, will, and must, cover the strangeness of such practice."

"And thou," said Tressilian, "what dost thou think to make of thyself?"

"France, Spain, either India, East or West, shall be my refuge," said Wayland, "ere I venture my life by residing within ken of Doboobie, Demetrius, or whatever else he calls himself for the time."

"Well," said Tressilian, "this happens not inopportunely—I had business for you in Berkshire—but in the opposite extremity to the place where thou art known; and ere thou hadst found out this new reason for living private, I had settled to send thee thither upon a secret embassage."

The artist expressed himself willing to receive his commands, and Tressilian, knowing he was well acquainted with the outline of his business at court, frankly explained to him the whole, mentioned the agreement which subsisted betwixt Giles Gosling and him, and told what had that day been averred in the presence-chamber by Varney, and supported by Leicester.

"Thou seest," he added, "that, in the circumstances in which I am placed, it behoves me to keep a narrow watch on the motions of these unprincipled men, Varney and his complices, Foster and Lambourne, as well as those of my Lord Leicester himself, who, I suspect, is partly a deceiver, and not altogether the deceived in that matter. Here is my ring, as a pledge to Giles Gosling—here is besides gold, which shall be trebled if thou serve me faithfully. Away down to Cumnor, and see what happens there."

"I go with double good-will," said the artist, "first, because I serve your honour, who has been so kind to me, and then, that I may escape my old master, who, if not an absolute incarnation of the devil, has, at least, as much of the demon about him, in will, word, and action, as ever polluted humanity.—And let him take care of me. I fly him now, as heretofore; but if, like the Scottish wild cattle, I am vexed by frequent pursuit, I may turn on him in hate and desperation. Will your honour command my nag to be saddled? I will but give the medicine to my lord, divided in its proper proportions, with a few instructions. His safety will then depend on the care of his friends and domestics—for the past he is guarded, but let him beware of the future."

Wayland Smith accordingly made his farewell visit to the Earl of Sussex, dictated instructions as to his regimen, and precautions concerning his diet, and left Say's Court without waiting for morning.

XIV

When Leicester returned to his lodging, after a day so important and so harassing, in which, after riding out more than one gale, and touching on more than one shoal, his bark had finally gained the harbour with banner displayed, he seemed to experience as much fatigue as a mariner after a perilous storm. He spoke not a word while his chamberlain exchanged his rich court-mantle for a furred night-robe, and when this officer signified that Master Varney desired to speak with his lordship, he replied only by a sullen nod. Varney, however, entered, accepting this signal as a permission, and the chamberlain withdrew.

The Earl remained silent and almost motionless in his chair, his head reclined on his hand, and his elbow resting upon the table which stood beside him, without seeming to be conscious of the entrance, or of the presence, of his confidant. Varney waited for some minutes, until he should speak, desirous to know what was the finally predominant mood of a mind, through which so many powerful emotions had that day taken their course. But he waited in vain, for Leicester continued still silent, and the confidant saw himself under the necessity of being the first to speak. "May I congratulate your lordship," he said, "on the deserved superiority you have this day attained over your most formidable rival?"

Leicester raised his head, and answered sadly, but without anger, "Thou, Varney, whose ready invention has involved me in a web of most mean and perilous falsehood, knowest best what small reason there is for gratulation on the subject."

"Do you blame me, my lord," said Varney, "for not betraying, on the first push, the secret on which your fortunes depended, and which you have so oft and so earnestly recommended to my safe keeping? Your lordship was present in person, and might have contradicted me and ruined yourself by an avowal of the truth; but surely it was no part of a faithful servant to have done so without your commands."

"I cannot deny it, Varney," said the Earl, rising and walking across the room; "my ambition has been traitor to my love."

"Say rather, my lord, that your love has been traitor to your greatness, and barred you from such a prospect of honour and power as the world cannot offer to any other

To make my honoured lady a countess, you have missed the chance of being yourself——"

He paused and seemed unwilling to complete the sentence.

"Of being myself *what?*" demanded Leicester; "speak out thy meaning, Varney."

"Of being yourself a KING, my lord," replied Varney; "and King of England to boot!—It is no treason to our Queen to say so. It would have chanced by her obtaining that which all true subjects wish her—a lusty, noble, and gallant husband."

"Thou ravest, Varney," answered Leicester. "She will accept love-tokens, ay, and requite them with the like—put sugared sonnets in her bosom—ay, and answer them too—push gallantry to the very verge where it becomes exchange of affection—but she writes *nil ultra* to all which is to follow, and would not barter one iota of her own supreme power for all the alphabet of both Cupid and Hymen."

"The better for you, my lord," said Varney, "that is, in the case supposed, if such be her disposition; since you think you cannot aspire to become her husband. Her favourite you are, and may remain, if the lady at Cumnor Place continues in her present obscurity."

"Poor Amy!" said Leicester, with a deep sigh; "she must be seen at Kenilworth; Elizabeth will not forget that she has so appointed."

"Let me sleep on that point," said Varney; "I cannot else perfect the device I have on the stithy, which I trust will satisfy the Queen and please my honoured lady, yet leave this fatal secret where it is now buried.—Has your lordship further commands for the night?"

"I would be alone," said Leicester. "Leave me, and place my steel casket on the table. Be within summons."

Varney retired—and the Earl, opening the window of his apartment, looked out long and anxiously upon the brilliant host of stars which glimmered in the splendour of a summer firmament. The words burst from him as at unawares—"I had never more need that the heavenly bodies should befriend me, for my earthly path is darkened and confused."

It is well known that the age reposed a deep confidence in the vain predictions of judicial astrology, and Leicester, though exempt from the general control of superstition, was not in this respect superior to his time; but, on the contrary, was remarkable for the encouragement which he gave to the professors of this pretended science. With heedful precaution to see that it had not been opened, or its locks tampered with, Leicester applied a key to the steel casket, and drew from it, first, a parcel of gold pieces, which he put into a silk purse; then a parchment inscribed with planetary signs, and the lines and calculations used in framing horoscopes, on which he gazed intently for a few moments; and lastly, took forth a large key, which, lifting aside the tapestry, he applied to a little concealed door in the corner of the apartment, and opening it, disclosed a stair constructed in the thickness of the wall.

"Alasco," said the Earl, with a voice raised, yet no higher raised than to be heard by the inhabitant of the small turret to which the stair conducted—"Alasco, I say, descend."

"I come, my lord," answered a voice from above. The foot of an aged man was heard slowly descending the narrow stair, and Alasco entered the Earl's apartment. The astrologer was a little man, and seemed much advanced in age, for his beard was long and white, and reached over his black doublet down to his silken girdle. His hair was of the same venerable hue. But his eyebrows were as dark as the keen and piercing black eyes which they shaded, and this peculiarity gave a wild and singular cast to the physiognomy of the old man. His cheek was still fresh and ruddy, and the eyes we have mentioned resembled those of a rat in acuteness, and even fierceness of expression. His manner was not without a sort of dignity; and the interpreter of the stars, though respectful, seemed altogether at his ease, and even assumed a tone of instruction and command in conversing with the prime favourite of Elizabeth.

"Your prognostications have failed, Alasco," said the Earl, when they had exchanged salutations—"He is recovering."

"My son," replied the astrologer, "let me remind you, I warranted not his death—nor is there any prognostication that can be derived from the heavenly bodies, their aspects and their conjunctions, which is not liable to be controlled by the will of Heaven."

"It is true," said Leicester, after a moment's reflection, "that the change has taken place in my situation which thou sayest the horoscope indicates."

"Wherefore this distrust, then, my son?" said the astrologer, assuming a tone of admonition; "the celestial intelligences brook not diffidence, even in their favourites."

"Peace, father," answered Leicester. "I have erred in doubting thee. If I have done thy skill injustice, I will make thee a lordly recompense."

He took a purse of gold from the strong casket which stood before him. "Have thou double the recompense which Varney promised.—Be faithful—be secret—obey the directions thou shalt receive from my master of the horse, and grudge not a little seclusion or restraint in my cause—it shall be richly considered.—Here, Varney "—calling him—" conduct this venerable man to thine own lodging—tend him heedfully in all things, but see that he holds communication with no one."

Varney bowed, and the astrologer kissed the Earl's hand in token of adieu, and followed the master of the horse to another apartment, in which were placed wine and refreshments for his use.

The astrologer sat down to his repast, while Varney shut two doors with great precaution, examined the tapestry, lest any listener lurked behind it; and then, sitting down opposite to the sage, began to question him.

"Saw you my signal from the court beneath?"

"I did," said Alasco, for by such name he was at present called, "and shaped the horoscope accordingly."

"Sure never man chose to run such a race as his, yet continued to retain those silly scruples!" replied Varney. "I am fain to cheat him to his own profit. But touching your matters, sage interpreter of the stars, I can tell you more of your own fortune than plan or figure can show. You must be gone from hence forthwith."

"I will not," said Alasco, peevishly. "I have been too much hurried up and down of late—immured for day and night in a desolate turret-chamber—I must enjoy my liberty, and pursue my studies, which are of more import than the fate of fifty statesmen, and favourites, that rise and burst like bubbles in the atmosphere of a court."

"At your pleasure," said Varney, with a sneer that habit had rendered familiar to his features, and which forms the principal characteristic which painters have assigned to that of Satan—" At your pleasure," he said; "you may enjoy your liberty and your studies until the daggers of Sussex's followers are clashing within your doublet and against your ribs." The old man turned pale, and Varney proceeded. "Wot you not he hath offered a reward for the arch-quack and poison-vender, Demetrius, who sold certain precious spices to his lordship's cook?—What! turn you pale, old friend? Does Hali already see an infortune in the House of Life? But hark thee in thine ear; had the seasoning which spiced Sussex's broth wrought more surely, I would have thought better of the chemical science thou dost boast so highly."

"Thou art a hardened villain, Varney," replied Alasco; "many will do those things, who dare not speak of them."

"And many speak of them who dare not do them," answered Varney; "but be not wroth—I will not quarrel with thee.—If I did, I were fain to live on eggs for a month, that I might feed without fear. Tell me at once, how came thine art to fail thee at this great emergency?"

"The Earl of Sussex's horoscope intimates," replied the astrologer, "that the sign of the ascendant being in combustion——"

"Away with your gibberish," replied Varney; "think'st thou it is the patron thou speak'st with?"

"I crave your pardon," replied the old man, "and swear to you, I know but one medicine that could have saved the Earl's life; and as no man living in England knows that antidote save myself, moreover, as the ingredients, one of them in particular, are scarce possible to be come by, I must needs suppose his escape was owing to such a constitution of lungs and vital parts, as was never before bound up in a body of clay."

"There was some talk of a quack who waited upon him," said Varney, after a moment's reflection. "Are you sure there is no one in England who has this secret of thine?"

"One man there was," said the doctor, "once my servant who might have stolen this of me, with one or two other secrets of art. But content you Master Varney, it is no part of my policy to suffer such interlopers to interfere in my trade. He pries into no mysteries more, I warrant you; for, as I well believe, he hath been wafted to heaven on the wing of a fiery dragon—Peace be with him!—But in this retreat of mine, shall I have the use of mine elaboratory?"

"Of a whole workshop, man," said Varney: "for a reverend father Abbot, who was fain to give place to bluff King Hal, and some of his courtiers, a score of years since, had a chemist's complete apparatus, which he was obliged to leave behind him to his successors. Marry, I neither defy the manna of Saint Nicholas, nor can I dispense with it. Thy first task must be to prepare some when thou getst down to my little sequestered retreat yonder, and then make as much gold as thou wilt."

"I will make no more of that dose," replied the alchemist resolutely.

"Then," said the master of the horse, "thou shalt be hanged for what thou hast made already, and so were the great secret for ever lost to mankind.—Do not humanity this injustice, good father, but e'en bend to thy destiny, and make us an ounce or two of this same stuff, which cannot prejudice above one or two individuals, in order to gain life-time to discover the universal medicine, which shall clear away all mortal diseases at once. But cheer up, thou grave, learned, and most melancholy jackanape! Hast thou not told me, that a moderate portion of thy drug hath mild effects, no ways ultimately dangerous to the human frame, but which produces depression of spirits, nausea, headache, an unwillingness to change of place—even such a state of temper as would keep a bird from flying out of a cage, were the door left open?"

"I have said so, and it is true," said the alchemist; "this effect will it produce, and the bird who partakes of it in such proportion, shall sit for a season drooping on her perch, without thinking of the free blue sky, or of the fair greenwood, though the one be lighted by the rays of the rising sun, and the other ringing with the newly-awakened song of all the feathered inhabitants of the forest."

"And this without danger to life?" said Varney, somewhat anxiously.

"Ay, so that proportion and measure be not exceeded; and so that one who knows the nature of the manna be ever near to watch the symptoms, and succour in case of need."

"Thou shalt regulate the whole," said Varney; "thy reward shall be princely, if thou keep'st time and touch, and exceedest not the due proportion, to the prejudice of her health—otherwise thy punishment shall be as signal."

"The prejudice of *her* health!" repeated Alasco; "it is, then, a woman I am to use my skill upon?"

"No, thou fool," replied Varney; "said I not it was a bird—a reclaimed linnet, whose pipe might soothe a hawk when in mid stoop?—I see thine eyes sparkle, and I know thy beard is not altogether so white as art has made it—*that*, at least, thou hast been able to transmute to silver. But mark me, this is no mate for thee. This caged bird is dear to one who brooks no rivalry, and far less such rivalry as thine, and her health must over all things be cared for. But she is in the case of being commanded down to yonder Kenilworth revels; and it is most expedient—most needful, most necessary, that she fly not thither. Understand me—a slight illness, sufficient to take away the desire of removing from thence, and to make such of your wise fraternity as may be called in to aid, recommend a quiet residence at home, will, in one word, be esteemed good service, and remunerated as such."

"I am not to be asked to affect the House of Life?" said the chemist.

"On the contrary, we will have thee hanged if thou dost," replied Varney.

"And I must," added Alasco, "have opportunity to do my turn, and all facilities for concealment or escape, should there be detection?"

"Well, well," answered Varney, hastily, "be stirring with grey light. It may be we shall not need thy medicine—Do nought till I myself come down—Michael Lambourne shall guide you to the place of your destination."

When Varney heard the adept's door shut and carefully bolted within, he stepped towards it, and with similar precaution carefully locked it on the outside, and took the key from the lock.—"So ho, Lambourne!" he called at another door, and Michael made his appearance with a flushed cheek and an unsteady step.

"Thou art drunk, thou villain!" said Varney to him.

"Doubtless, noble sir," replied the unabashed Michael, "we have been drinking all even to the glories of the day, and to my noble Lord of Leicester, and his valiant master of the horse.—Drunk! odds blades and poniards, he that would refuse to swallow a dozen healths on such an evening, is a base besognio, and a puckfoist, and shall swallow six inches of my dagger!"

"Hark ye, scoundrel," said Varney, "be sober on the instant—I command thee. I know thou canst throw off thy drunken folly, like a fool's coat, at pleasure; and if not, it were the worse for thee."

Lambourne drooped his head, left the apartment, and returned in two or three minutes, with his face composed, his hair adjusted, his dress in order, and exhibiting as great a difference from his former self as if the whole man had been changed.

"Art thou sober now, and dost thou comprehend me?" said Varney, sternly.

Lambourne bowed in acquiescence.

"Thou must presently down to Cumnor Place with the reverend man of art, who sleeps yonder in the little vaulted chamber. Here is the key, that thou mayest call him by times. Take another trusty fellow with you. Use him well on the journey, but let him not escape you—pistol him if he attempt it, and I will be your warrant. I will give thee letters to Foster. The doctor is to occupy the lower apartments of the eastern quadrangle, with freedom to use the old elaboratory and its implements.—He is to have no access to the lady but such as I shall point out—only she may be amused to see his philosophical jugglery. Thou wilt await at Cumnor Place my further orders; and as thou livest, beware of the ale-bench and the aquavitæ flask. Each breath drawn in Cumnor Place must be kept severed from common air."

"Enough, my Lord—I mean my worshipful master—soon I trust, to be my worshipful knightly master. You have given me my lesson and my licence; I will execute the one, and not abuse the other. I will be in the saddle by daybreak."

"Do so, and deserve favour.—Stay—ere thou goest fill me a cup of wine—not out of that flask, sirrah,"—as Lambourne was pouring out from that which Alasco had left half finished, "fetch me a fresh one."

Lambourne obeyed, and Varney, after rinsing his mouth with the liquor, drank a full cup, and said, as he took up a lamp, to retreat to his sleeping apartment, "It is strange—I am as little the slave of fancy as any one, yet I never speak for a few minutes with this fellow Alasco, but my mouth and lungs feel as if soiled with the fumes of calcined arsenic—pah!"

So saying, he left the apartment. Lambourne lingered to drink a cup of the freshly opened flask. "It is from Saint-John's-Berg," he said, as he paused in the draught to enjoy its flavour, "and has the true relish of the violet. But I must forbear it now, that I may one day drink it at my own pleasure." And he quaffed a goblet of water to quench the fumes of the Rhenish wine, retired slowly towards the door, made a pause, and then, finding the temptation irresistible, walked hastily back, and took another long pull at the wine flask, without the formality of a cup.

"Were it not for this accursed custom," he said, "I might climb as high as Varney himself. But who can climb when the room turns round with him like a parish-top? I would the distance were greater, or the road rougher, betwixt my hand and mouth!—But I will drink nothing to-morrow sav water—nothing save fair water."

XV

The public room of the Black Bear at Cumnor, to which the scene of our story now returns, boasted, on the evening which we treat of, no ordinary assemblage of guests. There had been a fair in the neighbourhood, and the cutting mercer of Abingdon, with some of the other personages whom the reader has already been made acquainted with, as friends and customers of Giles Gosling, had already formed their wonted circle around the evening fire, and were talking over the news of the day.

A lively, bustling, arch fellow, whose pack and oaken *ell wand*, studded duly with brass points, denoted him to be of Autolycus's profession, occupied a good deal of the attention, and furnished much of the amusement, of the evening. The pedlars of those days, it must be remembered, were men of far greater importance than the degenerate and degraded hawkers of our modern times. The pedlar of whom we speak bore, accordingly, an active and unrebuked share in the merriment to which the rafters of the bonny Black Bear of Cumnor resounded. He had his smile with pretty Mistress Cicely, his broad laugh with mine host, and his jest upon dashing Master Goldthred, who, though indeed without any such benevolent intention on his own part, was the general butt of the evening. The pedlar and he were closely engaged in a dispute upon the preference due to the Spanish nether-stock over the black Gascoigne hose, and mine host had just winked to the guests around him, as who should say, "You will have mirth presently, my masters," when the trampling of horses was heard in the courtyard, and the hostler was loudly summoned, with a few of the newest oaths then in vogue, to add force to the invocation. Out into the yard sallied mine host to do fitting salutation to his new guests; and presently returned, ushering into the apartment his own worthy nephew, Michael Lambourne, pretty tolerably drunk, and having under his escort the astrologer. Alasco, though still a little old man, had, by altering his gown to a riding-dress, trimming his beard and eyebrows, and so forth, struck at least a score of years from his apparent age, and might now seem an active man of sixty, or little upwards. He appeared at present exceedingly anxious, and had insisted much with Lambourne that they should not enter the inn, but go straight forward to the place of their destination. But Lambourne would not be controlled. "By Cancer and Capricorn," he vociferated, "and the whole heavenly host—besides all the stars that these blessed eyes of mine have seen sparkle in the southern heavens, to which these northern blinkers are but farthing candles, I will be unkindly for no one's humour—I will stay and salute my worthy uncle here.—Chesu! that good blood should ever be forgotten betwixt friends!—A gallon of your best, uncle, and let it go round to the health of the noble Earl of Leicester!—What! shall we not collogue together, and warm the cockles of our ancient kindness?—Shall we not collogue, I say?"

"Are you mad?" said the old man; "is the devil in you?—can you not let us begone without drawing all men's eyes on us?"

"Say'st thou?" said Lambourne; "thou art deceived now—no man shall see you an I give the word.—By heavens, masters, an any one dare to look on this old gentleman, I will slash the eyes out of his head with my poniard!—So sit down, old friend, and be merry—these are mine ingles—mine ancient inmates, and will betray no man."

"Had you not better withdraw to a private apartment, nephew?" said Giles Gosling; "you speak strange matter," he added, "and there be intelligencers everywhere."

"I care not for them," said the magnanimous Michael—"intelligencers? pshaw!—I serve the noble Earl of Leicester—Here comes the wine—Fill round, Master Skinker, a carouse to the health of the flower of England, the noble Earl of Leicester! I say, the noble Earl of Leicester! He that does me not reason is a swine of Sussex, and I'll make him kneel to the pledge, if I should cut his hams, and smoke them for bacon."

In the meanwhile, the old man, seeing his guide in this uncontrollable humour, ceased to remonstrate with him, and sitting down in the most obscure corner of the room, called for a small measure of sack, over which he seemed, as it were, to slumber, withdrawing himself as much as possible from general observation, and doing nothing which could recall his existence to the recollection of his fellow-traveller, who by this time had got into close intimacy with his ancient comrade, Goldthred of Abingdon.

"Never believe me, bully Mike," said the mercer, "if I am not as glad to see thee as ever I was to see a customer's money!—And now tell me, Mike—my honest Mike, how wears the Hollands you won of me?"

"Why, well, as you may see, Master Goldthred," answered Mike; "I will bestow a pot on thee for the handsel. Fill the flagon, Master Tapster."

"Thou wilt win no more Hollands, I think, on such wager, friend Mike," said the mercer; "for the sulky swain, Tony Foster, rails at thee all to nought, and swears you shall ne'er darken his doors again, for that your oaths are enough to blow the roof off a Christian man's dwelling."

"Doth he say so, the mincing hypocritical miser?" vociferated Lambourne;—"Why, then, he shall come down and receive my commands here, this blessed night, under my uncle's roof! And I will ring him such a black sanctus, that he shall think the devil hath him by the skirts for a month to come, for barely hearing me."

"Nay, now the pottle-pot is uppermost, with a witness!" said the mercer. "Tony Foster obey thy whistle!—Alas! good Mike, go sleep—go sleep."

"I tell thee what, thou thin-faced gull," said Michael Lambourne, in high chafe, "I will wager thee fifty angels against the first five shelves of thy shop, numbering upward from the false light, with all that is on them, that I make Tony Foster come down to this public house before we have finished three rounds."

"I will lay no bet to that amount," said the mercer, something sobered by an offer which intimated rather too private a knowledge, on Lambourne's part, of the secret recesses of his shop, "I will lay no such wager," he said; "but I will stake five angels against thy five, if thou wilt, that Tony Foster will not leave his own roof, or come to ale-house after prayer time, for thee, or any man."

"Content," said Lambourne.—"Here, uncle, hold stakes, and let one of your young bleed-barrels here—one of your infant tapsters, trip presently up to The Place, and give this letter to Master Foster, and say that I, his ingle, Michael Lambourne, pray to speak with him at mine uncle's castle here, upon business of grave import.—Away with thee, child, for it is now sun-down, and the wretch goeth to bed with the birds to save mutton-suet—faugh!"

Shortly after this messenger was despatched—an interval which was spent in drinking and buffoonery—he returned with the answer, that Master Foster was coming presently.

While Lambourne, whom the approach of Foster seemed to have recalled to a sense of his own condition, was busied in preparing to receive him, Giles Gosling stole up to the apartment of the pedlar, whom he found traversing the room in much agitation.

"You withdrew yourself suddenly from the company," said the landlord to the guest.

"It was time, when the devil became one among you," replied the pedlar.

"It is not courteous in you to term my nephew by such a name," said Gosling, "nor is it kindly in me to reply to it; and yet in some sort, Mike may be considered as a limb of Satan."

"Pooh—I talk not of the swaggering ruffian," replied the pedlar, "it is of the other, who, for aught I know—But when go they? or wherefore come they?"

"Marry, these are questions I cannot answer," replied the host. "But look you, sir, you have brought me a token from worthy Master Tressilian—a pretty stone it is." He took out the ring, and looked at it, adding, as he put it into his purse again, that it was too rich a guerdon for anything he could do for the worthy donor. He was, he said, in the public line, and it ill became him to be too inquisitive into other folk's concerns; he had already said, that he could hear nothing, but that the lady lived still at Cumnor Place, in the closest seclusion, and, to such as by chance had a view of her, seemed pensive and discontented with her solitude. "But here," he said, "if you are desirous to gratify your master, is the rarest chance that hath occurred for this many a day. Tony Foster is coming down hither, and it is but letting Mike Lambourne smell another wine-flask, and the Queen's command would not move him from the ale-bench. So they are fast for an hour or so—Now, if you will don your pack, which will be your best excuse, you may, perchance, win the ear of the old servant, being assured of the master's absence, to let you try to get some custom of the lady, and then you may learn more of her condition than I or any other can tell you."

"True—very true," answered Wayland, for he it was; "an excellent device, but methinks something dangerous—for, say Foster should return?"

"Very possible indeed," replied the host.

"Or say," continued Wayland, "the lady should render me cold thanks for my exertions?"

"As is not unlikely," replied Giles Gosling. "I marvel Master Tressilian will take such heed of her that cares not for him."

"In either case I were foully sped," said Wayland; "and therefore I do not, on the whole, much relish your device."

"Nay, but take me with you, good master serving-man," replied mine host; "this is your master's business and not mine; you best know the risk to be encountered, or how far you are willing to brave it. But that which you will not yourself hazard, you cannot expect others to risk."

"Hold, hold," said Wayland; "tell me but one thing—Goes yonder old man up to Cumnor?"

"Surely, I think so," said the landlord; "their servant said he was to take their baggage thither, but the ale-tap has been as potent for him as the sack-spigot has been for Michael."

"It is enough," said Wayland, assuming an air of resolution—"I will thwart that old villain's projects—my affright at his baleful aspect begins to abate, and my hatred to arise. Help me on with my pack, good mine host—And look to thyself, old Albumazar—there is a malignant influence in thy horoscope, and it gleams from the constellation Ursa Major."

So saying, he assumed his burden, and, guided by the landlord through the postern gate of the Black Bear, took the most private way from thence up to Cumnor Place.

XVI

In his anxiety to obey the Earl's repeated charges of secrecy, as well as from his own unsocial and miserly habits, Anthony Foster was more desirous, by his mode of housekeeping, to escape observation than to resist intrusive curiosity. Thus, instead of a numerous household, to secure his charge, and defend his house, he studied, as much as possible, to elude notice by diminishing his attendants; so that, unless when there were followers of the Earl or of Varney in the mansion, one old male domestic and two aged crones, who assisted in keeping the Countess's apartments in order, were the only servants of the family.

It was one of these old women who opened the door when Wayland knocked, and answered his petition, to be admitted to exhibit his wares to the ladies of the family, with a volley of vituperation, couched in what is there called the *jowring* dialect. The pedlar found the means of checking this vociferation, by slipping a silver groat into her hand, and intimating the present of some stuff for a coif, if the lady would buy of his wares.

"God ield thee, for mine is aw in littocks—Slocket with thy pack into gharn, mon—Her walks in gharn." Into the garden she ushered the pedlar accordingly, and pointing to an old ruinous garden-house, said, "Yonder be's her, mon—yonder be's her—Zhe will buy changes and zhe loikes stuffs."

"She has left me to come off as I may," thought Wayland, as he heard the hag shut the garden door behind him. "But they shall not beat me, and they dare not murder me, for so little trespass, and by this fair twilight. Hang it, I will on—a brave general never thought of his retreat till he was defeated. I see two females in the old garden-house yonder—but how to address them?—Stay—Will Shakspeare, be my friend in need. I will give them a taste of Autolycus." He then sung, with a good voice, and becoming audacity, the popular playhouse ditty—

"Lawn as white as driven snow,
Cyprus black as e'er was crow,
Gloves as sweet as damask roses,
Masks for faces and for noses."

"What hath fortune sent us here for an unwonted sight, Janet?" said the lady.

"One of those merchants of vanity, called pedlars," answered Janet demurely, "who utters his light wares in lighter measures. There will come mischief on't—Pray, dearest lady, let me bid the man begone!"

"I will have thee bid him come hither," said the Countess; —"or stay, thou terrified fool, I will bid him myself, and spare thee a chiding."

"Ah! well-a-day, dearest lady, if that were the worst," said Janet sadly, while the lady called to the pedlar, "Good fellow, step forward—undo thy pack—if thou hast good wares, chance has sent thee hither for my convenience and thy profit."

"What may your ladyship please to lack?" said Wayland, unstrapping his pack, and displaying its contents with as much dexterity as if he had been bred to the trade. Indeed he had occasionally pursued it in the course of his roving life, and now commended his wares with all the volubility of a trader, and showed some skill in the main art of placing prices upon them.

"What do I please to lack?" said the lady, "why, considering I have not for six long months bought one yard of lawn or cambric, or one trinket, the most inconsiderable, for my own use, and at my own choice, the better question is, what hast thou got to sell? Lay aside for me that cambric partlet and pair of sleeves—and those roundells of gold fringe, drawn out with cyprus—and that short cloak of cherry-coloured fine cloth garnished with gold buttons and loops; and take off two gowns of that russet cloth for Dorcas and Alison, Janet, to keep the old wretches warm against winter comes—and stay, hast thou no perfumes and sweet bags, or any handsome casting bottles, of the newest mode?"

"Were I a pedlar in earnest, I were a made merchant," thought Wayland, as he busied himself to answer the demands which she thronged one on another, with the eagerness of a young lady who has been long secluded from such a pleasing occupation. "But how to bring her to a moment's serious reflection?" Then, as he exhibited his choicest collection of essences and perfumes, he at once arrested her attention by observing that these articles had almost risen to double value, since the magnificent preparations made by the Earl of Leicester to entertain the Queen and court at his princely Castle of Kenilworth.

"Ha!" said the Countess, hastily; "that rumour then is true, Janet."

"Surely, madam," answered Wayland; "and I marvel it hath not reached your noble ladyship's ears. The Queen of England feasts with the noble Earl for a week during the Summer's Progress; and there are many who will tell you

England will have a king, and England's Elizabeth—God save her!—a husband, ere the Progress be over."

"They lie like villains!" said the Countess, bursting forth impatiently.

"For God's sake, madam, consider," said Janet, trembling with apprehension; "who would cumber themselves about pedlar's tidings?"

"May I perish, lady," said Wayland Smith, observing that her violence directed itself towards him, "if I have done anything to merit this strange passion!—I have said but what many men say."

By this time the Countess had recovered her composure, and endeavoured, alarmed by the anxious hints of Janet, to suppress all appearance of displeasure. "I were loath," she said, "good fellow, that our Queen should change the virgin style, so dear to us her people—think not of it." And then, as if desirous to change the subject, she added, "And what is this paste, so carefully put up in the silver box?" as she examined the contents of a casket in which drugs and perfumes were contained in separate drawers.

"It is a remedy, madam, for a disorder of which I trust your ladyship will never have reason to complain. The amount of a small turkey-bean, swallowed daily for a week, fortifies the heart against those black vapours, which arise from solitude, melancholy, unrequited affection, disappointed hope."

"I will take some of the medicine, Janet," said the Countess. "I have sometimes that dark melancholy which overclouds the brain."

"You shall not do so, madam," said Janet; "who shall answer that this fellow vends what is wholesome?"

"I will myself warrant my good faith," said Wayland; and, taking a part of the medicine, he swallowed it before them. The Countess now bought what remained, a step to which Janet, by further objections, only determined her the more obstinately. The lady then piled the purchases she had made together, flung her purse to Janet, and desired her to compute the amount, and to pay the pedlar; while she herself, as if tired of the amusement she at first found in conversing with him, wished him good evening, and walked carelessly into the house, thus depriving Wayland of every opportunity to speak with her in private. He hastened however, to attempt an explanation with Janet.

"Maiden," he said, "thou hast the face of one who should love her mistress. She hath much need of faithful service."

"And well deserves it at my hands," replied Janet; "but what of that?"

"Maiden, I am not altogether what I seem," said the pedlar, lowering his voice.

"The less like to be an honest man," said Janet.

"The more so," answered Wayland, "since I am no pedlar."

"Get thee gone then instantly, or I will call for assistance," said Janet; "my father must ere this time be returned."

"Do not be so rash," said Wayland; "you will do what you may repent of. I am one of your mistress's friends; and she had need of more, not that thou shouldst ruin those she hath. This evening, or to-morrow, will an old man come hither with thy father, who has the stealthy step of the cat, the shrewd and vindictive eye of the rat, the fawning wile of the spaniel, the determined snatch of the mastiff—of him beware, for your own sake and that of your mistress. See you, fair Janet, he brings the venom of the aspic under the assumed innocence of the dove. What precise mischief he meditates towards you I cannot guess, but death and disease have ever dogged his footsteps.—Say nought of this to thy mistress—my art suggests to me that in her state the fear of evil may be as dangerous as its operation.—But see that she take my specific, for"—(he lowered his voice, and spoke low but impressively in her ear)—"it is an antidote against poison—Hark, they enter the garden!"

In effect, a sound of noisy mirth and loud talking approached the garden door, alarmed by which Wayland Smith sprang into the midst of a thicket of overgrown shrubs, while Janet withdrew to the garden-house that she might not incur observation, and that she might at the same time conceal, at least for the present, the purchases made from the supposed pedlar, which lay scattered on the floor of the summer-house.

Janet, however, had no occasion for anxiety. Her father, his old attendant, Lord Leicester's domestic, and the astrologer, entered the garden in tumult and in extreme perplexity, endeavouring to quiet Lambourne, whose brain had now become completely fired with liquor, and who was one of those unfortunate persons, who, being once stirred with the vinous stimulus, do not fall asleep like other drunkards, but remain partially influenced by it for many hours, until at length, by successive draughts, they are elevated into a state of uncontrollable frenzy. Like many men in this state also, Lambourne neither lost the power of motion, speech, or expression; but, on the contrary, spoke with unwonted emphasis and readiness, and told all that at another time he would have been most desirous to keep secret.

"What!" ejaculated Michael, at the full extent of his voice, "am I to have no welcome—no carouse, when I have brought fortune to your old ruinous dog-house in the shape of a devil's ally, that can change slate-shivers into Spanish dollars?—Here you, Tony Fire-the-Fagot, papist, puritan, hypocrite, miser, profligate, devil, compounded of all men's sins, bow down and reverence him who has brought into thy house the very mammon thou worshippest."

"For God's sake," said Foster, "speak low—come into the house—thou shalt have wine, or whatever thou wilt."

"No, old puckfoist, I will have it here," thundered the inebriated ruffian—"here, *al fresco*, as the Italian hath it.—No, no, I will not drink with that poisoning devil within doors, to be choked with the fumes of arsenic and quicksilver; I learned from villain Varney to beware of that."

"Fetch him wine, in the name of all the fiends!" said the alchemist.

"Aha! and thou wouldst spice it for me, old Truepenny, wouldst thou not? Ay, I should have copperas, and hellebore, and vitriol, and aquafortis, and twenty devilish materials, bubbling in my brainpan, like a charm to raise the devil in a witch's caldron. Hand me the flask thyself, old Tony Fire-the-Fagot—and let it be cool—I will have no wine mulled at the pile of the old burnt bishops—Or stay, let Leicester be king if he will—good—and Varney, villain Varney, grand vizier—why, excellent!—and what shall I be, then!—why, emperor—Emperor Lambourne!—I will see this choice piece of beauty that they have walled up here for their private pleasures—I will have her this very night to serve my wine-cup, and put on my night-cap. What should a fellow do with two wives, were he twenty times an Earl?—answer me that, Tony boy, you old reprobate, hypocritical dog, whom God struck out of the book of life, but tormented with the constant wish to be restored to it—You old bishop-burning, blasphemous fanatic, answer me that!"

"I will stick my knife to the haft in him," said Foster, in a low tone, which trembled with passion.

"For the love of Heaven, no violence!" said the astrologer. "It cannot but be looked closely into.—Here, honest Lambourne, wilt thou pledge me to the health of the noble Earl of Leicester and Master Richard Varney?"

"I will, mine old Albumazar—I will, my trusty vendor of ratsbane—I would kiss thee, mine honest infractor of the Lex Julia (as they said at Leyden), didst thou not flavour so damnably of sulphur, and such fiendish apothecary's stuff.—Here goes it, up seyes—to Varney and Leicester!—two more noble mounting spirits, and more dark-seeking, deep-diving, high-flying, malicious, ambitious miscreants—well, I say no more, but I will whet my dagger on his heart-spone, that refuses to pledge me! And so, my masters——"

Thus speaking, Lambourne exhausted the cup which the astrologer had handed to him, and which contained not wine, but distilled spirits. He swore half an oath, dropped the empty cup from his grasp, laid his hand on his sword without being able to draw it, reeled, and fell without sense or motion into the arms of the domestic, who dragged him off to his chamber and put him to bed.

In the general confusion, Janet regained her lady's chamber unobserved, trembling like an aspen leaf, but determined to keep secret from the Countess the dreadful surmises which she could not help entertaining from the drunken ravings of Lambourne. Neither had these intimations escaped the ears of Wayland, who knew much better how to interpret them. He felt much compassion at beholding so lovely a creature as the Countess, and whom he had first seen in the bosom of domestic happiness, exposed to the machinations of such a gang of villains. From some words which Lambourne had dropped among his ravings, Wayland now, for the first time, felt inclined to doubt that Varney had acted entirely on his own account, in wooing and winning the affections of this beautiful creature. Fame asserted of this zealous retainer, that he had accommodated his lord in former love intrigues, and it occurred to Wayland Smith, that Leicester himself might be the party chiefly interested. Her marriage with the Earl he could not suspect; but even the discovery of such a passing intrigue with a lady of Mistress Amy Robsart's rank, was a secret of the deepest importance to the stability of the favourite's power over Elizabeth. "If Leicester himself should hesitate to stifle such a rumour by very strange means," said he to himself, "he has those about him who would do him that favour without waiting for his consent. If I would meddle in this business, it must be in such guise as my old master uses when he compounds his manna of Satan, and that is with a close mask on my face. So I will quit Giles Gosling to-morrow, and change my course and place of residence as often as a hunted fox. I should like to see this little puritan, too, once more. She looks both pretty and intelligent, to have come of such a caitiff as Anthony Fire-the-Fagot."

Giles Gosling received the adieux of Wayland rather joyfully than otherwise. The honest publican saw so much peril in crossing the course of the Earl of Leicester's favourite, that his virtue was scarce able to support him in the task, and he was well pleased when it was likely to be removed from his shoulders; still, however, professing his goodwill, and readiness, in case of need, to do Mr. Tressilian or his emissary any service, in so far as consisted with his character of a publican.

XVII

The splendour of the approaching revels at Kenilworth was now the conversation through all England; and every thing was collected at home, or from abroad, which could add to the gaiety or glory of the prepared reception of Elizabeth, at the house of her most distinguished favourite. Meantime, Leicester appeared daily to advance in the Queen's favour. Of the difficulties which surrounded his power, "too great to keep or to resign," Leicester was fully sensible; and as he looked anxiously round for the means of maintaining himself in his precarious situation, and sometimes contemplated those of descending from it in safety, he saw but little hope of either. At such moments, his thoughts turned to dwell upon his secret marriage, and its consequences; and it was in bitterness against himself, if not against his unfortunate Countess, that he ascribed to that hasty measure, adopted in the ardour of what he now called inconsiderate passion, at once the impossibility of placing his power on a solid basis, and the immediate prospect of its precipitate downfall.

He would then call for Varney, whose advice was now more frequently resorted to than ever, because the Earl remembered the remonstrances which he had made against his secret contract. And their consultation usually terminated in anxious deliberation, how or in what manner the Countess was to be produced at Kenilworth. These communings had for some time ended always in a resolution to delay the Progress from day to day. But at length a peremptory decision became necessary.

"Elizabeth will not be satisfied without her presence," said the Earl; "whether any suspicion hath entered her mind, as my own apprehensions suggest, or whether the petition of Tressilian is kept in her memory by Sussex, or some other secret enemy, I know not; but amongst all the favourable expressions which she uses to me, she often recurs to the story of Amy Robsart. She said to me kindly, but peremptorily, 'We will give you no further time for preparations, my lord, lest you should altogether ruin yourself. On Saturday, the 9th of July, we will be with you at Kenilworth—We pray you to forget none of our appointed guests and suitors, and in especial this light-o'-love, Amy Robsart. We would wish to see the woman who could postpone yonder poetical gentleman, Master Tressilian, to your man, Richard Varney.'—Now, Varney, ply thine invention, whose forge hath availed us so often; for sure as my name is Dudley, the danger menaced by my horoscope is now darkening around me."

"Can my lady be by no means persuaded to bear for a brief space the obscure character which circumstances impose on her?" said Varney, after some hesitation.

"How, sirrah! my Countess term herself *thy* wife—that may neither stand with my honour nor with hers."

"Alas! my lord," answered Varney, "and yet such is the quality in which Elizabeth now holds her; and to contradict this opinion is to discover all."

"It is impossible," said the Earl, waving his hand; "I know neither authority nor entreaties would make her endure thy name for an hour."

"It is somewhat hard, though," said Varney, in a dry tone; and without pausing on that topic, he added, "Suppose some one were found to represent her? Such feats have been performed in the courts of as sharp-eyed monarchs as Queen Elizabeth."

"Utter madness, Varney," answered the Earl; "the counterfeit would be confronted with Tressilian, and discovery become inevitable."

"My lord, I know not what to say," answered Varney; "but were I myself in such perplexity, I would ride post down to Cumnor Place, and compel my wife to give her consent to such measures as her safety and mine required."

"Do thou go thyself, Varney; the devil has given thee that sort of eloquence, which is most powerful in the worst cause. I should stand self-convicted of villany were I to urge such a deceit—Begone, I tell thee—Must I entreat thee to mine own dishonour?"

"No, my lord," said Varney—"but if you are serious in intrusting me with the task of urging this most necessary measure, you must give me a letter to my lady, as my credentials, and trust to me for backing the advice it contains with all the force in my power. And such is my opinion of my lady's love for your lordship, and of her willingness to do that which is at once to contribute to your pleasure and your safety, that I am sure she will condescend to bear for a few brief days the name of so humble a man as myself, especially since it is not inferior in antiquity to that of her own paternal house."

Leicester seized on writing materials, and twice or thrice commenced a letter to the Countess, which he afterwards tore into fragments. At length he finished a few distracted lines, in which he conjured her, for reasons nearly concerning his life and honour, to consent to bear the name of Varney for a few days, during the revels at Kenilworth. He added, that Varney would communicate all the reasons which rendered this deception indispensable; and having signed and sealed these credentials, he flung them over the table to Varney, with a motion that he should depart, which his adviser was not slow to comprehend and to obey.

While Leicester was stupifying the remonstrances of his own conscience, by appealing to political necessity for his apology, or losing himself amidst the wild dreams of ambition, his agent left town and tower behind him, on his hasty journey to Berkshire. *He* also nourished high hope. He had brought Lord Leicester to the point which he had desired, of committing to him the most intimate recesses of his breast, and of using him as the channel of his most confidential intercourse with his lady. Henceforward it would, he foresaw, be difficult for his patron either to dispense with his services, or refuse his requests, however unreasonable.

The frequent visits of Leicester at Cumnor, during the earlier part of their union, had reconciled the Countess to the solitude and privacy to which she was condemned; but when these visits became rarer and more rare, and when the void was filled up with letters of excuse, not always very warmly expressed, and generally extremely brief, discontent and suspicion began to haunt those splendid apartments which love had fitted up for beauty. Joyfully, therefore, did she start up when the hasty clatter of horses' feet, heard in the courtyard, called her to the window, exclaiming, "It is Leicester!—it is my noble Earl!—it is my Dudley!—Every stroke of his horse's hoof sounds like a note of lordly music!"

There was a brief bustle in the mansion, and Foster, with his downward look and sullen manner, entered the apartment to say, "That Master Richard Varney was arrived from my lord, having ridden all night, and craved to speak with her ladyship instantly."

"Varney?" said the disappointed Countess; "and to speak with me?—sphaw! But he comes with news from Leicester—so admit him instantly."

Varney entered the room in the dress in which he had waited on his master that morning to court, the splendour of which made a strange contrast with the disorder arising from hasty riding during a dark night and foul ways. His brow wore an anxious and hurried expression, as one who has that to say of which he doubts the reception, and who hath yet posted on from the necessity of communicating his tidings. The Countess's anxious eye at once caught the alarm, as she exclaimed, "You bring news from my lord, Master Varney—Gracious Heaven! is he ill?"

"Madam," answered Varney, "we are not alone, and my lord's message was for your ear only."

"Leave us, Janet, and Master Foster," said the Lady; "but remain in the next apartment, and within call."

Foster and his daughter retired, agreeably to the Lady Leicester's commands, into the next apartment, which was the withdrawing-room. All was as still as death, and the voices of those who spoke in the inner chamber were, if they spoke at all, carefully subdued to a tone which could not be heard in the next. At once, however, they were heard to speak fast, thick, and hastily; and presently after the voice of the Countess was heard exclaiming, at the highest pitch to which indignation could raise it, "Undo the door, sir, I command you!—Undo the door!—I will have no other reply!" she continued, drowning with her vehement accents the low and muttered sounds which Varney was heard to utter betwixt whiles. "What ho! without there!" she persisted, accompanying her words with shrieks, "Janet, alarm the house!—Foster, break open the door—I am detained here by a traitor!—Use axe and lever, Master Foster—I will be your warrant!"

"It shall not need, madam," Varney was at length distinctly heard to say. "If you please to expose my Lord's important concerns and your own to the general ear, I will not be your hindrance."

The door was unlocked and thrown open, and Janet and her father rushed in, anxious to learn the cause of these reiterated exclamations.

When they entered the apartment, Varney stood by the door grinding his teeth, with an expression in which rage, and shame, and fear. had each their share. The Countess stood in the midst of her apartment like a juvenile Pythoness, under the influence of the prophetic fury. The veins in her beautiful forehead started into swoln blue lines through the hurried impulse of her articulation—her cheek and neck glowed like scarlet—her eyes were like those of an imprisoned eagle, flashing red lightning on the foes whom it cannot reach with its talons. Janet, as soon as the door was open, ran to her mistress; and more slowly, yet with more haste than he was wont, Anthony Foster went to Richard Varney.

"In the Truth's name, what ails your-ladyship?" said the former.

"What, in the name of Satan, have you done to her?" said Foster to his friend.

"Who, I?—nothing," answered Varney, but with sunken head and sullen voice; "nothing but communicated to her her lord's commands, which, if the lady list not to obey, she knows better how to answer it than I may pretend to do."

"Now, by Heaven, Janet," said the Countess, "the false traitor lies in his throat! He must needs lie, for he speaks to the dishonour of my noble lord—he must needs lie doubly, for he speaks to gain ends of his own, equally execrable and unattainable."

"You have misapprehended me, lady," said Varney, with a sulky species of submission and apology; "let this matter rest till your passion be abated, and I will explain all."

"Thou shalt never have an opportunity to do so," said the Countess.—"Look at him, Janet. He is fairly dressed, hath the outside of a gentleman, and hither he came to persuade me it was my lord's pleasure—nay, more, my wedded lord's commands, that I should go with him to Kenilworth, and before the Queen and nobles, and in presence of my own wedded lord, that I should acknowledge him—*him* there—that very cloak-brushing, shoe-cleaning fellow—*him* there, my lord's lackey, for my liege lord and husband; furnishing against myself, great God! whenever I was to vindicate my right and my rank, such weapons as would hew my just claim from the root, and destroy my character to be regarded as an honourable matron of the English nobility!"

"You hear her, Foster, and you, young maiden, hear this lady," answered Varney, taking advantage of the pause which the Countess had made in her charge, more for lack of breath than for lack of matter—"You hear that her heat only objects to me the course which our good lord, for the purpose to keep certain matters secret, suggests in the very letter which she holds in her hands."

"Now, so heaven pardon me my useless anger," answered the Countess, "thou art an impudent deceiver! Never will I believe that the noble Dudley gave countenance to so dastardly, so dishonourable a plan. Thus I tread on his infamy, if indeed it be, and thus destroy its remembrance for ever!"

So saying, she tore in pieces Leicester's letter, and stamped, in the extremity of impatience, as if she would have annihilated the minute fragments into which she had rent it.

"Bear witness," said Varney, collecting himself, "she hath torn my lord's letter, in order to burden me with the scheme of his devising; and although it promises nought but danger and trouble to me, she would lay it to my charge, as if I had any purpose of mine own in it."

"Thou liest, thou treacherous slave!" said the Countess, in spite of Janet's attempts to keep her silent, in the sad foresight that her vehemence might only furnish arms against herself.—"Thou liest," she continued—"I would I were a man but for five minutes! It were space enough to make a craven like thee confess his villany. But go—begone—Tell thy master, that when I take the foul course to which such scandalous deceits as thou hast recommended on his behalf must necessarily lead me, I will give him a rival something worthy of the name. He shall not be supplanted by an ignominious lackey, whose best fortune is to catch a gift of his master's last suit of clothes ere it is threadbare, and who is only fit to seduce a suburb-wench by the bravery of new roses in his master's old pantofles. Go, begone, sir—I scorn thee so much, that I am ashamed to have been angry with thee."

Varney left the room with a mute expression of rage, and was followed by Foster, whose apprehension, naturally slow, was overpowered by the eager and abundant discharge of indignation, which, for the first time, he had heard burst from the lips of a being, who had seemed till that moment too languid, and too gentle, to nurse an angry thought, or utter an intemperate expression. In the meanwhile, the Countess traversed the apartment, with shame and anger contending on her lovely cheek.

"The villain," she said, "the cold-blooded calculating slave!—But I unmasked him, Janet—I made the snake uncoil all his folds before me, and crawl abroad in his naked deformity—I suspended my resentment, at the danger of suffocating under the effort, until he had let me see the very bottom of a heart more foul than hell's darkest corner.—And thou, Leicester, is it possible thou couldst bid me for a moment deny my wedded right in thee, or thyself yield it to another?—But it is impossible—the villain has lied in all.—Janet, I will not remain here longer—I fear him—I fear thy father—I grieve to say it, Janet—but I fear thy father, and, worst of all, this odious Varney. I will escape from Cumnor."

"Alas! madam, whither would you fly, or by what means will you escape from these walls?"

"I know not, Janet," said the unfortunate young lady, looking upwards, and clasping her hands together, "I know not where I shall fly, or by what means; but I am certain the God I have served will not abandon me in this dreadful crisis, for I am in the hands of wicked men."

"Do not think so, dear lady," said Janet; "my father is stern and strict in his temper, and severely true to his trust—but yet——"

At this moment Anthony Foster entered the apartment, bearing in his hand a glass cup, and a small flask. His manner was singular; for, while approaching the Countess with the respect due to her rank, he had till this time suffered to become visible, or had been unable to suppress, the obdurate sulkiness of his natural disposition, which, as is usual with those of his unhappy temper, was chiefly exerted towards those over whom circumstances gave him control. His hand trembled also, his voice faltered, and his whole outward behaviour exhibited so much that was suspicious, that his daughter Janet, after she had stood looking at him in astonishment for some seconds, seemed at once to collect herself to execute some hardy resolution, raised her head, assumed an attitude and gait of determination and authority, and walking slowly betwixt her father and her mistress, took the salver from the hand of the former, and said in a low, but marked and decided tone, "Father, *I* will fill for my noble mistress, when such is her pleasure."

"Thou, my child?" said Foster, eagerly and apprehensively; "no, my child—it is not *thou* shalt render the lady this service."

"And why, I pray you," said Janet, "if it be fitting that the noble lady should partake of the cup at all?"

"Why—why?" said the seneschal, hesitating, and then bursting into passion as the readiest mode of supplying the lack of all other reason—"Why, because it is my pleasure, minion, that you should not!—Get you gone to the evening lecture."

"Now, as I hope to hear lecture again," replied Janet, "I will not go thither this night, unless I am better assured of my mistress's safety. Give me that flask, father";—and she took it from his reluctant hand, while he resigned it as if conscience-struck—"And now," she said, "father, that which shall benefit my mistress cannot do *me* prejudice. Father, I drink to you."

Foster, without speaking a word, rushed on his daughter, and wrested the flask from her hand; then, as if embarrassed by what he had done, and totally unable to resolve what he should do next, he stood with it in his hand, one foot advanced and the other drawn back, glaring on his daughter with a countenance, in which rage, fear, and convicted villany, formed a hideous combination.

"This is strange, my father," said Janet, keeping her eye fixed on his, in the manner in which those who have the charge of lunatics are said to overawe their unhappy patients; "will you neither let me serve my lady, nor drink to her myself?"

The courage of the Countess sustained her through this dreadful scene, of which the import was not the less obvious that it was not even hinted at. She preserved even the rash carelessness of her temper, and though her cheek had grown pale at the first alarm, her eye was calm, and almost scornful. "Will *you* taste this rare cordial, Master Foster? Perhaps you will not yourself refuse to pledge us, though you permit not Janet to do so—Drink, sir, I pray you."

"I will not," answered Foster.

"And for whom, then, is the precious beverage reserved, sir?" said the Countess.

"For the devil, who brewed it!" answered Foster; and, turning on his heel, he left the chamber.

Janet looked at her mistress with a countenance expressive in the highest degree of shame, dismay, and sorrow.

"Do not weep for me, Janet," said the Countess, kindly.

"No, madam," replied her attendant, in a voice broken by sobs, "it is not for you I weep, it is for myself—it is for that unhappy man. Those who are dishonoured before man—those who are condemned by God, have cause to mourn—not those who are innocent!—Farewell, madam!" she said, hastily assuming the mantle in which she was wont to go abroad.

"Do you leave me, Janet?" said her mistress—"desert me in such an evil strait?"

"Desert you, madam!" exclaimed Janet; and running back to her mistress, she imprinted a thousand kisses on her hand—"desert you!—may the Hope of my trust desert me when I do so!—No, madam; well you said the God you serve will open you a path for deliverance. There is a way of escape; I have prayed night and day for light, that I might see how to act betwixt my duty to yonder unhappy man, and that which I owe to you. Sternly and fearfully that light has now dawned, and I must not shut the door which God opens.—Ask me no more. I will return in brief space."

So speaking, she wrapped herself in her mantle, and saying to the old woman whom she passed in the outer room, that she was going to evening prayer, she left the house.

Meanwhile her father had reached once more the laboratory, where he found the accomplices of his intended guilt.

"Has the sweet bird sipped?" said Varney, with half a smile; while the astrologer put the same question with his eyes, but spoke not a word.

"She has not, nor she shall not from my hands," replied Foster; "would you have me do murder in my daughter's presence?"

"Wert thou not told, thou sullen and yet faint-hearted slave," answered Varney, with bitterness, "that no *murder*, as thou call'st it, with that staring look and stammering tone, is designed in the matter? Wert thou not told, that a brief illness, such as woman puts on in very wantonness, that she may wear her night-gear at noon, and lie on a settle when she should mind her domestic business, is all here aimed at? Here is a learned man will swear it to thee by the key of the Castle of Wisdom."

"I swear it," said Alasco, "that the elixir thou hast there in the flask will not prejudice life! I swear it by that immortal and indestructible quintessence of gold, which pervades every substance in nature, though its secret existence can be traced by him only to whom Trismegistus renders the key of the Cabala."

"An oath of force," said Varney. "Foster, thou wert worse than a Pagan to disbelieve it. Believe me, moreover, who swear by nothing but by my own word, that if you be not conformable, there is no hope, no, not a glimpse of hope, that this thy leasehold may be transmuted into a copyhold. Thus, Alasco will leave your pewter artillery untransmigrated, and I, honest Anthony, will still have thee for my tenant."

"I know not, gentlemen," said Foster, "where your designs tend to; but in one thing I am bound up,—that, fall back fall edge, I will have one in this place that may pray for me, and that one shall be my daughter. I have lived ill, and the world has been too weighty with me; but she is as innocent as ever she was when on her mother's lap, and she, at least, shall have her portion in that happy City, whose walls are of pure gold, and the foundations garnished with all manner of precious stones."

"Ay, Tony," said Varney, "that were a paradise to thy heart's content.—Debate the matter with him, Doctor Alasco; I will be with you anon."

So speaking, Varney arose, and taking the flask from the table, he left the room.

"I tell thee, my son," said Alasco to Foster, as soon as Varney had left them, "that whatever this bold and profligate railer may say of the mighty science, in which, by Heaven's blessing, I have advanced so far, that I would not call the wisest of living artists my better or my teacher—I say, howsoever yonder reprobate may scoff at things too holy to be apprehended by men merely of carnal and evil thoughts, yet believe, that the city beheld by St. John, in that bright vision of the Christian Apocalypse, that New Jerusalem, of which all Christian men hope to partake, sets forth typically the discovery of the Grand Secret, whereby the most precious and perfect of nature's works are elicited out of her basest and most crude productions; just as the light and gaudy butterfly, the most beautiful child of the summer's breeze, breaks forth from the dungeon of a sordid chrysalis."

"I touched on the question with Master Holdforth last exercising night," said Foster; "but he says your doctrine is heterodox, and a damnable and false exposition."

"He is in the bonds of ignorance, my son," answered Alasco, "and as yet burning bricks in Egypt; or, at best, wandering in the dry desert of Sinai. Thou didst ill to speak to such a man of such matters. I will, however, give thee proof, and that shortly, which I will defy that peevish divine to confute, though he should strive with me as the magicians strove with Moses before King Pharaoh. I will do projection in thy presence, my son,—in thy very presence, and thine eyes shall witness the truth."

"Stick to that, learned sage," said Varney, who at this moment entered the apartment; "if he refuse the testimony of thy tongue, yet how shall he deny that of his own eyes?"

"Varney!" said the adept—"Varney already returned! Hast thou——" he stopped short.

"Have I done mine errand, thou wouldst say," replied Varney—"I have!—Come, let us each to our chamber—We shall see the event to-morrow."

"What didst thou do to make her swallow it?" said Foster, shuddering.

"Nothing," answered Varney, "but looked on her with that aspect which governs madmen, women, and children. They told me, in Saint Luke's Hospital, that I have the right look for overpowering a refractory patient. The keepers made me their compliments on't; so I know how to win my bread, when my court-favour fails me."

"And art thou not afraid," said Foster, "lest the dose be disproportioned?"

"If so," replied Varney, "she will but sleep the sounder, and the fear of that shall not break my rest. Good night, my masters."

Anthony Foster groaned heavily, and lifted up his hands and eyes. The alchemist intimated his purpose to continue some experiment of high import during the greater part of the night, and the others separated to their places of repose.

XVIII

The summer evening was closed, and Janet, just when her longer stay might have occasioned suspicion and inquiry in that jealous household, returned to Cumnor Place, and hastened to the apartment in which she had left her lady. She found her with her head resting on her arms, and these crossed upon a table which stood before her. As Janet came in, she neither looked up nor stirred.

Her faithful attendant ran to her mistress with the speed of lightning, and rousing her at the same time with her hand, conjured the Countess, in the most earnest manner, to look up, and say what thus affected her. The unhappy lady raised her head accordingly, and looking on her attendant with a ghastly eye, and cheek as pale as clay, "Janet," she said, "I have drunk it."

"God be praised!" said Janet, hastily—"I mean, God be praised that it is no worse—the potion will not harm you. —What you have swallowed cannot injure you, for the antidote has been taken before it, and I hastened hither to tell you that the means of escape are open to you."

"Escape!" exclaimed the lady, as she raised herself hastily in her chair, while light returned to her eye and life to her cheek; "but ah! Janet, it comes too late. Varney was here since thou wert gone, and commanded me, with eyes in which I read my fate, to swallow yon horrible drug. Oh, Janet! it must be fatal; never was harmless drug served by such a cup-bearer!"

"He did not deem it harmless, I fear," replied the maiden; "but God confounds the devices of the wicked. Believe me, as I swear by the dear Gospel in which we trust, your life is safe from his practice. Did you not debate with him?"

"The house was silent," answered the lady—"thou gone —no other but he in the chamber—and he capable of every crime. I did but stipulate he would remove his hateful presence, and I drank whatever he offered.—But you spoke of escape, Janet; can I be so happy?"

"Are you strong enough to bear the tidings, and make the effort?" said the maiden.

"Strong!" answered the Countess—"Ask the hind, when the fangs of the deer-hound are stretched to gripe her, if she is strong enough to spring over a chasm. I am equal to every effort that may relieve me from this place."

"Hear me, then," said Janet. "One, whom I deem an assured friend of yours, has shown himself to me in various disguises, and sought speech of me, which,—for my mind was not clear on the matter until this evening,—I have ever declined. He was the pedlar who brought you goods—the itinerant hawker who sold me books—whenever I stirred abroad I was sure to see him. The event of this night determined me to speak with him. He waits even now at the postern-gate of the park with means for your flight.—But have you strength of body?—Have you courage of mind?—Can you undertake the enterprise?"

"She that flies from death," said the lady, "finds strength of body—she that would escape from shame, lacks no strength of mind. The thoughts of leaving behind me the villain who menaces both my life and honour, would give me strength to rise from my death-bed."

"In God's name, then, lady," said Janet, "I must bid you adieu, and to God's charge I must commit you!"

"Will you not fly with me, then, Janet?" said the Countess, anxiously—"Am I to lose thee? Is this thy faithful service?"

"Lady, I would fly with you as willingly as bird ever fled from cage, but my doing so would occasion instant discovery and pursuit. I must remain, and use means to disguise the truth for some time—May Heaven pardon the falsehood, because of the necessity!"

"And am I then to travel alone with this stranger?" said the lady—"Bethink thee, Janet, may not this prove some deeper and darker scheme to separate me perhaps from you, who are my only friend?"

"No, madam, do not suppose it," answered Janet, readily; "the youth is an honest youth in his purpose to you; and a friend to Mr. Tressilian, under whose direction he has come hither."

"If he be a friend of Tressilian," said the Countess, "I will commit myself to his charge, as to that of an angel sent from heaven; for than Tressilian, never breathed mortal man more free of whatever was base, false, or selfish. He forgot himself whenever he could be of use to others—Alas! and how was he requited!"

With eager haste they collected the few necessaries which it was thought proper the Countess should take with her, and which Janet, with speed and dexterity, formed into a small bundle, not forgetting to add such ornaments of intrinsic value as came most readily in her way, and particularly a casket of jewels, which she wisely judged might prove of service in some future emergency. The Countess of Leicester next changed her dress for one which Janet usually wore upon any brief journey, for they judged it necessary to avoid every external distinction which might attract attention. Ere these preparations were fully made, the moon had arisen in the summer heaven, and all in the mansion had betaken themselves to rest, or at least to the silence and retirement of their chambers.

The fugitive Countess, with her guide, traversed with hasty steps the broken and interrupted path, which had once been an avenue, now totally darkened by the boughs of spreading trees which met above their head, and now receiving a doubtful and deceiving light from the beams of the moon, which penetrated where the axe had made openings in the wood. Janet now, for the first time, ventured to ask her lady, which way she proposed to direct her flight. Receiving no immediate answer—for, perhaps, in the confusion of her mind, this very obvious subject of deliberation had not occurred to the Countess—Janet ventured to add, "Probably to your father's house, where you are sure of safety and protection?"

"No, Janet," said the Lady, mournfully, "I left Lidcote Hall while my heart was light and my name was honourable, and I will not return thither till my lord's permission and public acknowledgment of our marriage restore me to my native home, with all the rank and honour which he has bestowed on me."

"And whither will you, then, madam?" said Janet.

"To Kenilworth, girl," said the Countess, boldly and freely. "Thou seest, my love, I have no desire but to throw myself on my husband's protection. I have left the abode he assigned for me because of the villany of the persons by whom I was surrounded—but I will disobey his commands in no other particular. I will appeal to him alone—I will be protected by him alone—To no other, than at his pleasure, have I or will I communicate the secret union which combines our hearts and our destinies. I will see him, and receive from his own lips the directions for my future conduct. Do not argue against my resolution, Janet; you will only confirm me in it, and, to own the truth, I am resolved to know my fate at once, and from my husband's own mouth, and to seek him at Kenilworth is the surest way to attain my purpose."

By this time the Countess, not without internal shuddering, saw herself beyond the walls which her husband's strict commands had assigned to her as the boundary of her walks. Waiting with much anxiety for their appearance, Wayland Smith stood at some distance, shrouding himself behind a hedge which bordered the high-road.

"Is all safe?" said Janet to him, anxiously, as he approached them with caution.

"All," he replied; "but I have been unable to procure a horse for the lady. Giles Gosling, the cowardly hilding, refused me one on any terms whatever; lest, forsooth, he should suffer—but no matter. She must ride on my palfrey, and I must walk by her side until I come by another horse. There will be no pursuit, if you, pretty Mistress Janet, forget not thy lesson."

"No more than the wise widow of Tekoa forgot the words which Joab put into her mouth," answered Janet. "To-morrow, I say that my lady is unable to rise."

"Ay, and that she hath aching and heaviness of the head—a throbbing at the heart, and lists not to be disturbed.—Fear not; they will take the hint, and trouble thee with few questions—they understand the disease."

The Countess was now placed by Wayland upon his horse, around the saddle of which he had placed his cloak, so folded as to make her a commodious seat.

"Adieu, and may the blessing of God wend with you!" said Janet, again kissing her mistress's hand, who returned her benediction with a mute caress. They then tore themselves asunder, and Janet, addressing Wayland, exclaimed, "May Heaven deal with you at your need, as you are true or false to this most injured and most helpless lady!"

"Amen! dearest Janet," replied Wayland;—"and believe me, I will so acquit myself of my trust, as may tempt even your pretty eyes, saint-like as they are, to look less scornfully on me when we next meet."

The latter part of this adieu was whispered into Janet's ear; and, although she made no reply to it directly, yet her manner, influenced no doubt by her desire to leave every motive in force which could operate towards her mistress's safety, did not discourage the hope which Wayland's words expressed. She re-entered the postern-door, and locked it behind her, while Wayland, taking the horse's bridle in his hand, and walking close by its head, they began in silence their dubious and moonlight journey.

Although Wayland Smith used the utmost despatch which he could make, yet this mode of travelling was so slow, that when morning began to dawn through the eastern mist, he found himself no farther than about ten miles distant from Cumnor. Wayland Smith strode on with affected alacrity, now talking to the horse as one expert in the language of the stable, now whistling to himself low and interrupted snatches of tunes, and now assuring the lady there was no danger; while at the same time he looked sharply around to see that there was nothing in sight, which might give the lie to his words while they were issuing from his mouth. Thus did they journey on, until they reached Donnington without further alarm, where it became matter of necessity that the Countess should enjoy two or three hours' repose, during which Wayland disposed himself, with equal address and alacrity, to carry through those measures on which the safety of their future journey seemed to depend.

Wayland procured such change of apparel for the lady, as well as himself, as gave them both the appearance of country people of the better class; it being further resolved, that in order to attract the less observation, she should pass upon the road for the sister of her guide. A good, but not a gay horse, fit to keep pace with his own, and gentle enough for a lady's use, completed the preparations for the journey; for making which, and for other expenses, he had been furnished with sufficient funds by Tressilian. And thus, about noon, after the Countess had been refreshed by the sound repose of several hours, they resumed their journey, with the purpose of making the best of their way to Kenilworth, by Coventry and Warwick. They were not, however, destined to travel far, without meeting some cause of apprehension.

It is necessary to premise, that the landlord of the inn had informed them that a jovial party, intended, as he understood, to present some of the masques or mummeries, which made a part of the entertainment with which the Queen was usually welcomed on the royal Progresses, had left the village of Donnington an hour or two before them, in order to proceed to Kenilworth. Now it had occurred to Wayland, that, by attaching themselves in some sort to this group, as soon as they should overtake them on the road, they would be less likely to attract notice, than if they continued to travel entirely by themselves. He communicated his idea to the Countess, who, only anxious to arrive at Kenilworth without interruption, left him free to choose the manner in which this was to be accomplished. They pressed forward their horses, therefore, with the purpose of overtaking the party of intended revellers, and making the journey in their company; and had just seen the little party, consisting partly of riders, partly of people on foot, crossing the summit of a gentle hill, at about half-a-mile's distance and disappearing on the other side, when Wayland, who maintained the most circumspect observation of all that met his eye in every direction, was aware that a rider was coming up behind them on a horse of uncommon action, accompanied by a serving-man, whose utmost efforts were unable to keep up with his master's trotting hackney. and who, therefore, was fain to follow him at a hand gallop.

Wayland looked anxiously back at these horsemen, became considerably disturbed in his manner, looked back again, and became pale, as he said to the lady—"That is Richard Varney's trotting gelding—I would know him among a thousand nags—this is a worse business than meeting the mercer."

"Draw your sword," answered the lady, "and pierce my bosom with it, rather than I should fall into his hands!"

"I would rather by a thousand times," answered Wayland, "pass it through his body, or even mine own. But, to say truth, fighting is not my best point, though I can look on cold iron, like another, when needs must be. Could we once reach the party before us, we may herd among them, and pass unobserved, unless Varney be really come in express pursuit of us, and then, happy man be his dole!"

While he thus spoke, he alternately urged and restrained his horse, desirous to maintaim the fleetest pace that was consistent with the idea of an ordinary journey on the road, but to avoid such rapidity of movement as might give rise to suspicion that they were flying.

As such a pace they ascended the gentle hill we have mentioned, and, looking from the top, had the pleasure to see that the party which had left Donnington before them, were in the little valley or bottom on the other side, where the road was traversed by a rivulet, beside which was a cottage or two. In this place they seemed to have made a pause, which gave Wayland the hope of joining them, and becoming a part of their company, ere Varney should overtake them. He was the more anxious, as his companion, though she made no complaints, and expressed no fear, began to look so deadly pale, that he was afraid she might drop from her horse. Notwithstanding this symptom of decaying strength, she pushed on her palfrey so briskly, that they joined the party in the bottom of the valley, ere Varney appeared on the top of the gentle eminence which they descended.

They found the company to which they meant to associate themselves, in great disorder. The women with dishevelled locks, and looks of great importance, ran in and out of one of the cottages, and the men stood around holding the horses, and looking silly enough, as is usual in cases where their assistance is not wanted.

Wayland and his charge paused, as if out of curiosity, and then gradually, without making any inquiries, or being asked any questions, they mingled with the group, as if they had always made part of it.

They had not stood there above five minutes, anxiously keeping as much to the side of the road as possible, so as to place the other travellers betwixt them and Varney, when Lord Leicester's master of the horse, followed by Lambourne, came riding fiercely down the hill, their horses' flanks and the rowels of their spurs showing bloody tokens of the rate at which they travelled. The appearance of the stationary group around the cottages, wearing their buckram suits in order to protect their masquing dresses, having their light cart for transporting their scenery, and carrying various fantastic properties in their hands for the more easy conveyance, let the riders at once into the character and purpose of the company.

"You are revellers," said Varney, "designing for Kenilworth."

"*Recte quidem, Domine spectatissime,*" answered one of the party.

"And why the devil stand you here," said Varney, "when your utmost despatch will but bring you to Kenilworth in time? The Queen dines at Warwick to-morrow, and you loiter here, ye knaves."

"In very truth, sir," said a little diminutive urchin, wearing a vizard with a couple of sprouting horns of an elegant scarlet hue, having moreover, a black serge jerkin drawn close to his body by lacing, garnished with red stockings, and shoes so shaped as to resemble cloven feet,—"in very truth, sir, and you are in the right on't.—It is my father the Devil, who, being taken in labour, has delayed our present purpose, by increasing our company with an imp too many."

"And what is the name of this devil or devil's dam, who has timed her turns so strangely?" said Varney. "We can ill afford to spare any of our actors."

"*Gaudet nomine Sibyllæ,*" said the first speaker, "she is called Sibyl Laneham, wife of Master Richard Laneham——"

"Clerk to the Council-Chamber door," said Varney; "why, she is inexcusable, having had experience how to have ordered her matters better. But who were those, a man and a woman, I think, who rode so hastily up the hill before me even now?—do they belong to your company?"

Wayland was about to hazard a reply to this alarming inquiry, when the little diablotin again thrust in his oar.

"So please you," he said, coming close up to Varney, and speaking so as not to be overhead by his companions, "the man was our devil major, who has tricks enough to supply the lack of a hundred such as Dame Laneham; and the woman—if you please, is the sage person whose assistance is most particularly necessary to our distressed comrade."

"Oh, what, you have got the wise woman, then?" said Varney. "Why, truly, she rode like one bound to a place where she was needed—And you have a spare limb of Satan, besides, to supply the place of Mistress Lancham!"

"Ay, sir," said the boy, "they are not so scarce in this world as your honour's virtuous eminence would suppose.—This master-fiend shall spit a few flashes of fire, and eruct a volume or two of smoke on the spot, if it will do you pleasure—you would think he had Ætna in his abdomen."

"I lack time just now, most hopeful imp of darkness, to witness his performance," said Varney; "but here is something for you all to drink the lucky hour—and so, as the play says, 'God be with your labour!'"

Thus speaking, he struck his horse with the spurs, and rode on his way.

Lambourne tarried a moment or two behind his master, and rummaged his pouch for a piece of silver, which he bestowed on the communicative imp, as he said, for his encouragement on his path to the infernal regions, some sparks of whose fire, he said, he could discover flashing from him already. Then having received the boy's thanks for his generosity, he also spurred his horse, and rode after his master as fast as the fire flashes from flint.

"And now," said the wily imp, sideling close up to Wayland's horse, and cutting a gambol in the air, which seemed to vindicate his title to relationship with the prince of that element, "I have told them who *you* are, do you in return tell me who *I* am?"

"Either Flibbertigibbet," answered Wayland Smith, "or else an imp of the devil in good earnest."

"Thou hast hit it," answered Dickie Sludge; "I am thine own Flibbertigibbet, man; and I have broken forth of bounds, along with my learned preceptor, as I told thee I would do, whether he would or not.—But what lady hast thou got with thee? I saw thou wert at fault the first question was asked, and so I drew up for thy assistance. But I must know all who she is, dear Wayland."

"O, she, man?—she is a poor sister of mine," said Wayland—"she can sing and play o' the lute, would win the fish out o' the stream."

"Let me hear her instantly," said the boy; "I love the lute rarely; I love it of all things, though I never heard it."

"Then love it on hearsay a little longer, till my sister is recovered from the fatigue of her journey," said Wayland;—muttering afterwards betwixt his teeth, "The devil take the imp's curiosity!—I must keep fair weather with him, or we shall fare the worse."

"Well," said the imp, drawing off, "all I say is,—remember you have kept a secret from me, and if I give thee not a

Rowland for thine Oliver, my name is not Dickon Sludge!"

This threat, and the distance at which Hobgoblin kept from him for the rest of the way, alarmed Wayland very much, and he suggested to his pretended sister, that, on pretext of weariness, she should express a desire to stop two or three miles short of the fair town of Warwick, promising to rejoin the troop in the morning. A small village inn afforded them a resting-place; and it was with secret pleasure that Wayland saw the whole party, including Dickon, pass on, after a courteous farewell, and leave them behind.

"To-morrow, madam," he said to his charge, "we will, with your leave, again start early, and reach Kenilworth before the rout which are to assemble there."

The Countess gave assent to the proposal of her faithful guide; but, somewhat to his surprise, said nothing further on the subject, which left Wayland under the disagreeable uncertainty whether or no she had formed any plan for her own future proceedings, as he knew her situation demanded circumspection, although he was but imperfectly acquainted with all its peculiarities. Concluding, however, that she must have friends within the castle, whose advice and assistance she could safely trust, he supposed his task would be best accomplished by conducting her thither in safety, agreeably to her repeated commands.

XIX

It chanced well for the Countess's purpose, that Wayland Smith, whose previous wandering and unsettled life had made him acquainted with almost all England, was intimate with all the by-roads, as well as direct communications, through the beautiful county of Warwick. For such and so great was the throng which flocked in all directions towards Kenilworth, to see the entry of Elizabeth into that splendid mansion of her prime favourite, that the principal roads were actually blocked up and interrupted, and it was only by circuitous by-paths that the travellers could proceed on their journey.

It was thus he avoided Warwick, within whose Castle (that fairest monument of ancient and chivalrous splendour which yet remains uninjured by time) Elizabeth had passed the previous night, and where she was to tarry until past noon, at that time the general hour of dinner throughout England, after which repast she was to proceed to Kenilworth. Meanwhile, Wayland's anxiety at the Countess's repeated fits of indisposition, and her obvious distraction of mind, was hourly increasing, and he became extremely desirous, that, according to her reiterated requests, she should be safely introduced into the Castle, where, he doubted not, she was secure of a kind reception, though she seemed unwilling to reveal on whom she reposed her hopes.

"An I were once rid of this peril," thought he, "and if any man shall find me playing squire of the body to a damosel-errant, he shall have leave to beat my brains out with my own sledge-hammer!"

At length the princely Castle appeared, upon improving which, and the domains around, the Earl of Leicester had, it is said, expended sixty thousand pounds sterling, a sum equal to half a million of our present money. It was with mingled feelings that the unfortunate Countess of Leicester viewed those grey and massive towers, when she first beheld them rise above the embowering and richly-shaded woods, over which they seemed to preside. She, the undoubted wife of the great Earl, of Elizabeth's minion, and England's mighty favourite, was approaching the presence of her husband, and that husband's sovereign, under the protection, rather than the guidance, of a poor juggler; and though unquestioned Mistress of that proud Castle, whose lightest word ought to have had force sufficient to make its gates leap from their massive hinges to receive her, yet she could not conceal from herself the difficulty and peril which she must experience in gaining admission into her own halls.

The risk and difficulty, indeed, seemed to increase every moment, and at length threatened altogether to put a stop to her further progress, at the great gate leading to a broad and fair road, which, traversing the breadth of the chase for the space of two miles, and commanding several most beautiful views of the Castle and lake, terminated at the newly-constructed bridge, to which it was an appendage, and which was destined to form the Queen's approach to the Castle on that memorable occasion.

Here the Countess and Wayland found the gate at the end of this avenue, which opened on the Warwick road, guarded by a body of the Queen's mounted yeomen of the guard, armed in corselets richly carved and gilded, and wearing morions instead of bonnets, having their carabines resting with the butt-end on their thighs. Neither did Wayland know what excuse to make in order to obtain admittance, and he was debating the matter in his head with great uncertainty, when the Earl's pursuivant having cast an eye upon him, exclaimed, to his no small surprise, "Yeomen, make room for the fellow in the orange-tawny cloak—Come forward, Sir Coxcomb, and make haste. What, in the fiend's name, has kept you waiting? Come forward with your bale of woman's gear."

While the pursuivant gave Wayland this pressing yet uncourteous invitation, which, for a minute or two, he could not imagine was applied to him, the yeomen speedily made a free passage for him, while, only cautioning his companion to keep the muffler close around her face, he entered the gate leading her palfrey, but with such a drooping crest, and such a look of conscious fear and anxiety, that the crowd, not greatly pleased at any rate with the preference bestowed upon them, accompanied their admission with hooting, and a loud laugh of derision.

Admitted thus within the chase, though with no very flattering notice or distinction, Wayland and his charge rode forward, musing what difficulties it would be next their lot to encounter, through the broad avenue, which was sentinelled on either side by a long line of retainers, armed with swords and partisans, richly dressed in the Earl of Leicester's liveries, and bearing his cognisance of the Bear and Ragged Staff, each placed within three paces of each other, so as to line the whole road from the entrance into the park to the bridge. And indeed when the lady obtained the first commanding view of the castle, with its stately towers rising from within a long sweeping line of outward walls, ornamented with battlements, and turrets, and platforms, at every point of defence, with many a banner streaming from its walls, and such a bustle of gay crests, and waving plumes, disposed on the terraces and battlements, and all the gay and gorgeous scene, her heart, unaccustomed to such splendour, sank as if it died within her, and for a moment she asked herself, what she had offered up to Leicester to deserve to become the partner of this princely splendour. But her pride and generous spirit resisted the whisper which bade her despair.

"I have given him," she said, "all that woman has to give. Name and fame, heart and hand, have I given the Lord of all this magnificence, at the altar, and England's Queen could give him no more. He is my husband—I am his wife—Whom God hath joined, man cannot sunder. I will be bold in claiming my right; even the bolder, that I come thus unexpected, and thus forlorn. I know my noble Dudley well! He will be something impatient at my disobeying him, but Amy will weep, and Dudley will forgive her."

These meditations were interrupted by a cry of surprise from her guide Wayland, who suddenly felt himself grasped firmly round the body by a pair of long thin black arms, belonging to some one who had dropped himself out of an oak-tree upon the croup of his horse, amidst the shouts of laughter which burst from the sentinels.

"This must be the devil, or Flibbertigibbet again!" said Wayland, after a vain struggle to disengage himself, and unhorse the urchin who clung to him; "Do Kenilworth oaks bear such acorns?"

"In sooth do they, Master Wayland," said his unexpected adjunct, "and many others, too hard for you to crack, for as old as you are, without my teaching you. How would you have passed the pursuivant at the upper gate yonder, had not I warned him our principal juggler was to follow us? and here have I waited for you, having clambered up into the tree from the top of the wain, and I suppose they are all mad for want of me by this time."

"Nay, then, thou art a limb of the devil in good earnest," said Wayland. "I give thee way, good imp, and will walk by thy counsel; only, as thou art powerful, be merciful."

As he spoke, they approached a strong tower, at the south extremity of the long bridge we have mentioned, which served to protect the outer gateway of the Castle of Kenilworth. The gigantic porter who waited at the gate beneath, and actually discharged the duties of warder, was a man whose huge stature, thewes, sinews, and bulk in proportion, would have enabled him to enact Colbrand, Ascapart, or any other giant of romance, without raising himself nearer to heaven even by the altitude of a chopen. The demeanour of this modern Titan, when Wayland Smith bent his attention to him, had in it something arguing much mental embarrassment and vexation; for sometimes he sat down for an instant on a massive stone bench, which seemed placed for his accommodation beside the gateway, and then ever and anon he started up scratching his huge head, and striding to and fro on his post, like one under a fit of impatience and anxiety. It was while the porter was pacing before the gate in this agitated manner, that Wayland, modestly, yet as a matter of course (not, however, without some mental misgiving), was about to pass him, and enter the portal arch. The porter, however, stopped his progress, bidding him, in a thundering voice, "Stand back!" and enforcing his injunction by heaving up his steel-shod mace, and dashing it on the ground before Wayland's horse's nose with such vehemence that the pavement flashed fire, and the archway rang to the clamour. Wayland, availing himself of Dickie's hints, began to state that he belonged to a band of performers to which his presence was indispensable,—that he had been accidentally detained behind,—and much to the same purpose. But the warden was inexorable, and kept muttering and murmuring something betwixt his teeth, which Wayland could make little of; and addressing betwixt whiles a refusal of admittance, couched in language which was but too intelligible.

"Stand still," whispered Flibbertigibbet into Wayland's ear, "I know where the shoes pinches, and will tame him in an instant."

He dropped down from the horse, and skipping up to the porter, plucked him by the tail of the bear-skin, so as to induce him to decline his huge head, and whispered something in his ear. Not at the command of the lord of some Eastern talisman did ever Afrite change his horrid frown into a look of smooth submission, more suddenly than the gigantic porter of Kenilworth relaxed the terrors of his looks, at the instant Flibbertigibbet's whisper reached his ears. He flung his club upon the ground, and caught up Dickie Sludge, raising him to such a distance from the earth, as might have proved perilous had he chanced to let him slip.

"It is even so," he said, with a thundering sound of exultation—"it is even so, my little dandieprat—But who the devil could teach it thee?"

"Do not thou care about that," said Flibbertigibbet; "but,"—he looked at Wayland and the lady, and then sunk what he had to say in a whisper, which needed not be a loud one, as the giant held him for his convenience close to his ear. The porter then gave Dickie a warm caress, and set him on the ground with the same care which a careful housewife uses in replacing a cracked china-cup upon her mantelpiece, calling out at the same time to Wayland and the lady, "In with you—in with you—and take heed how you come too late another day when I chance to be porter."

"Ay, ay, in with you," added Flibbertigibbet; "I must stay a short space with my honest Philistine, my Goliath of Gath here; but I will be with you anon, and at the bottom of all your secrets, were they as deep and dark as the castle dungeon."

"I do believe thou wouldst," said Wayland; "but I trust the secret will be soon out of my keeping, and then I shall care the less whether thou or any one knows it."

Wayland halted his horse, and looked upon the lady, as if waiting her commands what was next to be done, since they had safely reached the place of destination. As she remained silent, Wayland, after waiting a minute or two, ventured to ask her, in direct terms, what were her next commands. She raised her hand to her forehead, as if in the act of collecting her thoughts and resolution, while she answered him in a low and suppressed voice, like the murmurs of one who speaks in a dream—"Commands? I may indeed claim right to command, but who is there will obey me?"

Then suddenly raising her head, like one who had formed a decisive resolution, she addressed a gaily dressed domestic, who was crossing the court with importance and bustle in his countenance.—"Stop, sir," she said, "I desire to speak with the Earl of Leicester."

"With whom, an it please you?" said the man, surprised at the demand; and then, looking upon the mean equipage of her who used towards him such a tone of authority, he added, with insolence, "Why, what Bess of Bedlam is this, would ask to see my lord, on such a day as the present?"

"Friend," said the Countess, "be not insolent—my business with the Earl is most urgent."

"You must get some one else to do it, were it thrice as urgent," said the fellow.—"I should summon my lord from the Queen's royal presence to do *your* business, should I?—I were liked to be thanked with a horse-whip. I marvel our old porter took not measure of such ware with his club, instead of giving them passage; but his brain is addled with getting his speech by heart."

Two or three persons stopped, attracted by the fleering way in which the serving-man expressed himself; and Wayland, alarmed both for himself and the lady, hastily addressed himself to one who appeared the most civil, and, thrusting a piece of money into his hand, held a moment's counsel with him, on the subject of finding a place of temporary retreat for the lady. The person to whom he spoke, being one in some authority, rebuked the others for their incivility, and commanding one fellow to take care of the stranger's horses, he desired them to follow him. The Countess retained presence of mind sufficient to see that it was absolutely necessary she should comply with his request; and, leaving the rude lackeys and grooms to crack their brutal jests about light heads, light heels, and so forth, Wayland and she followed in silence the deputy-usher, who undertook to be their conductor.

They were conducted by their guide to a small but strong tower occupying the north-east angle of the building, adjacent to the great hall, and filling up a space betwixt the immense range of kitchens and the end of the great hall itself. The lower part of this tower was occupied by some of the household officers of Leicester, owing to its convenient vicinity to the places where their duty lay; but in the upper storey, which was reached by a narrow winding stair, was a small octangular chamber, which, in the great demand for lodgings, had been on the present occasion fitted up for the reception of guests, though generally said to have been used as a place of confinement for some unhappy person who had been there murdered. There was a bed in the apartment, and other preparations for the reception of a guest, to which the Countess paid but slight attention, her notice being instantly arrested by the sight of writing materials placed on the table (not very commonly to be found in the bed-rooms of those days), which instantly suggested the idea of writing to Leicester, and remaining private until she had received his answer.

The deputy-usher having introduced them into this commodious apartment, courteously asked Wayland, whose generosity he had experienced, whether he could do anything further for his service. Upon receiving a gentle hint, that some refreshment would not be unacceptable, he presently conveyed the smith to the buttery-hatch, where dressed provisions of all sorts were distributed, with hospitable profusion to all who asked for them. Wayland was readily supplied with some light provisions, such as he thought would best suit the faded appetite of the lady, and did not omit the opportunity of himself making a hasty but hearty meal on more substantial fare. He then returned to the apartment in the turret, where he found the Countess, who had finished her letter to Leicester; and, in lieu of a seal and silken thread, had secured it with a braid of her own beautiful tresses, fastened by what is called a true-love knot.

"Good friend," said she to Wayland, "whom God hath sent to aid me at my utmost need, I do beseech thee, as the last trouble you shall take for an unfortunate lady, to deliver this letter to the noble Earl of Leicester. Be it received as it may," she said, with features agitated betwixt hope and fear, "thou, good fellow, shalt have no more cumber with me. But I hope the best; and if ever lady made a poor man rich, thou hast surely deserved it at my hand, should my happy days ever come round again. Give it, I pray you, into Lord Leicester's own hand, and mark how he looks on receiving it."

Wayland, on his part, readily undertook the commission, but anxiously prayed the lady, in his turn, to partake of some refreshment; in which he at length prevailed, more through importunity, and her desire to see him begone on his errand, than from any inclination the Countess felt to comply with his request. He then left her, advising her to lock her door on the inside, and not to stir from her little apartment—and went to seek an opportunity of discharging her errand, as well as of carrying into effect a purpose of his own, which circumstances had induced him to form.

In fact, from the conduct of the lady during the journey—her long fits of profound silence—the irresolution, and uncertainty which seemed to pervade all her movements, and the obvious incapacity of thinking and acting for herself, under which she seemed to labour, Wayland had formed the not improbable opinion, that the difficulties of her situation had in some degree affected her understanding.

When she had escaped from the seclusion of Cumnor Place, and the dangers to which she was there exposed, it would have seemed her most rational course to retire to her father's, or elsewhere, at a distance from the power of those by whom these dangers had been created. When, instead of doing so, she demanded to be conveyed to Kenilworth, Wayland had been only able to account for her conduct, by supposing that she meant to put herself under the tutelage of Tressilian, and to appeal to the protection of the Queen. But now, instead of following this natural course, she intrusted him with a letter to Leicester, the patron of Varney, and within whose jurisdiction at least, if not under his express authority, all the evils she had already suffered were inflicted upon her. This seemed an unsafe and even a desperate measure, and Wayland felt anxiety for his own safety, as well as that of the lady, should he execute her commission before he had secured the advice and countenance of a protector. He therefore resolved, before delivering the letter to Leicester, that he would seek out Tressilian, and communicate to him the arrival of the lady at Kenilworth, and thus at once rid himself of all farther responsibility, and devolve the task of guiding and protecting this unfortunate lady upon the patron who had at first employed him in her service.

"He will be a better judge than I am," said Wayland; "whether she is to be gratified in this humour of appeal to my Lord of Leicester, which seems like an act of insanity; and, therefore, I will turn the matter over on his hands, deliver him the letter, receive what they list to give me by way of guerdon, and then show the Castle of Kenilworth a pair of light heels; for, after the work I have been engaged in, it will be, I fear, neither a safe nor wholesome place of residence; and I would rather shoe colts on the coldest common in England than share in their gayest revels."

XX

AMID the universal bustle which filled the Castle and its environs, it was no easy matter to find out any individual; and Wayland was still less likely to light upon Tressilian, whom he sought so anxiously, because, sensible of the danger of attracting attention, in the circumstances in which he was placed, he dared not make general inquiries among the retainers or domestics of Leicester. He learned, however, by indirect questions, that, in all probability, Tressilian must have been one of a large party of gentlemen in attendance on the Earl of Sussex, who had accompanied their patron that morning to Kenilworth, when Leicester had received them with marks of the most formal respect and distinction. He farther learned, that both Earls, with their followers, and many other nobles, knights, and gentlemen, had taken horse, and gone towards Warwick several hours since, for the purpose of escorting the Queen to Kenilworth.

Her Majesty's arrival, like other great events, was delayed from hour to hour; and it was now announced by a breathless post, that her Majesty being detained by her gracious desire to receive the homage of her lieges who had thronged to wait upon her at Warwick, it would be the hour of twilight ere she entered the Castle. That he might not lose an opportunity of meeting his patron in the event of this being the case, Wayland placed himself in the base-court of the Castle, near Mortimer's Tower, and watched every one who went or came by the bridge, the extremity of which was protected by that building. Thus stationed, nobody could enter or leave the Castle without his observation, and most anxiously did he study the garb and countenance of every horseman, as, passing from under the opposite Gallery Tower, they paced slowly, or curveted, along the tilt-yard, and approached the entrance of the base-court.

But while Wayland gazed thus eagerly to discover him whom he saw not, he was pulled by the sleeve by one by whom he himself would not willingly have been seen.

This was Dickie Sludge, or Flibbertigibbet, who, like the imp whose name he bore, and whom he had been accoutred in order to resemble, seemed to be ever at the ear of those who thought least of him. Whatever were Wayland's internal feelings, he judged it necessary to express pleasure at their unexpected meeting.

"Ha! is it thou, my minikin—my miller's thumb—my prince of Cacodemons—my little mouse?"

"Ay," said Dickie, "the mouse which gnawed asunder the toils, just when the lion who was caught in them began to look wonderfully like an ass."

"Why, thou little hop-the-gutter, thou art as sharp as vinegar this afternoon! But tell me, how didst thou come off with yonder jolterheaded giant, whom I had left thee with.—I was afraid he would have stripped thy clothes, and so swallowed thee, as men peel and eat a roasted chestnut."

"Had he done so," replied the boy, "he would have had more brains in his guts than ever he had in his noddle. But the giant is a courteous monster, and more grateful than many other folk whom I have helped at a pinch, Master Wayland Smith."

"Beshrew me, Flibbertigibbet," replied Wayland, "but thou art sharper than a Sheffield whittle! I would I knew by what charm you muzzled yonder old bear."

"Ay, that is in your own manner," answered Dickie; "you think fine speeches will pass muster instead of good-will. However, as to this honest porter, you must know, that when we presented ourselves at the gate yonder, his brain was overburdened with a speech that had been penned for him, and which proved rather an overmatch for his gigantic faculties. Now this same pithy oration had been indited, like sundry others, by my learned magister, Erasmus Holiday, so I had heard it often enough to remember every line. As soon as I heard him blundering and floundering like a fish upon dry land, through the first verse, and perceived him at a stand, I knew where the shoe pinched, and helped him to the next word, when he caught me up in an ecstasy, even as you saw but now. I promised, as the price of your admission, to hide me under his bearish gaberdine, and prompt him in the hour of need. I have just now been getting some food in the Castle, and am about to return to him."

"That's right—that's right, my dear Dickie," replied Wayland; "haste thee, for Heaven's sake! else the poor giant will be utterly disconsolate for want of his dwarfish auxiliary—Away with thee, Dickie!"

"Ay, ay!" answered the boy—"Away with Dickie, when we have got what good of him we can.—You will not let me know the story of this lady, then, who is as much sister of thine as I am?"

"Why, what good would it do thee, thou silly elf?" said Wayland.

"Oh, stand ye on these terms?" said the boy; "well, I care not greatly about the matter,—Fare-thee-well, Wayland—I will to my large-limbed friend, who, if he have not so sharp a wit as some folk, is at least more grateful for the service which other folk render him. And so again, good evening to ye."

So saying, he cast a somersault through the gateway, and, lighting on the bridge, ran with the extraordinary agility, which was one of his distinguishing attributes towards the Gallery Tower, and was out of sight in an instant.

would to God I were safe out of this Castle again!" prayed Wayland, internally; "for now that this mischievous imp has put his finger in the pie, it cannot but prove a mess fit for the devil's eating. I would to Heaven Master Tressilian would appear!"

Tressilian, whom he was thus anxiously expecting in one direction, had returned to Kenilworth by another access. It was thus that he met not Wayland, who was impatiently watching his arrival, and whom he himself would have been, at least, equally desirous to see.

Having delivered his horse to the charge of his attendant, he walked for a space in the Pleasance and in the garden, rather to indulge in comparative solitude his own reflections than to admire those singular beauties of nature and art which the magnificence of Leicester had there assembled. But as he left the garden, and heard the busy hum mixed with music and laughter, which floated around him, he felt an uncontrollable reluctance to mix with society, whose feelings were in a tone so different from his own, and resolved, instead of doing so, to retire to the chamber assigned him, and employ himself in study until the tolling of the great castle-bell should announce the arrival of Elizabeth.

Tressilian crossed accordingly by the passage betwixt the immense range of kitchens and the great hall, and ascended to the third storey of Mervyn's Tower, and applying himself to the door of the small apartment which had been allotted to him, was surprised to find it was locked. He then recollected that the deputy-chamberlain had given him a master-key, advising him, in the present confused state of the Castle, to keep his door as much shut as possible. He applied this key to the lock, the bolt revolved, he entered, and in the same instant saw a female form seated in the apartment, and recognised that form to be Amy Robsart. The astonishment of the Countess was scarce less than that of Tressilian, although it was of shorter duration, because she had heard from Wayland that he was in the Castle. She had started upon his first entrance, and now stood facing him, the paleness of her cheeks having given way to a deep blush.

"Tressilian," she said at length, "why come you here?"

"Nay, why come *you* here, Amy," returned Tressilian, "unless it be at length to claim that aid, which, as far as one man's heart and arm can extend, shall instantly be rendered to you?"

She was silent a moment, and then answered in a sorrowful, rather than an angry tone,—"I require no aid, Tressilian, and would rather be injured than benefited by any which your kindness can offer me. Believe me, I am near one whom law and love oblige to protect me."

"The villain, then, hath done you the poor justice which remained in his power," said Tressilian; "and I behold before me the wife of Varney!"

"The wife of Varney!" she replied, with all the emphasis of scorn; "with what base name, sir, does your boldness stigmatise the—the—the"—She hesitated, dropped her tone of scorn, looked down, and was confused and silent, for she recollected what fatal consequences might attend her completing the sentence with "the Countess of Leicester," which were the words that had naturally suggested themselves. It would have been a betrayal of the secret on which her husband had assured her that his fortunes depended, to Tressilian, to Sussex, to the Queen, and to the whole assembled court. "Never," she thought, "will I break my promised silence. I will submit to every suspicion rather than that."

The tears rose to her eyes, as she stood silent before Tressilian; while, looking on her with mingled grief and pity, he said, "Alas! Amy, your eyes contradict your tongue. That speaks of a protector, willing and able to watch over you; but these tell me you are ruined, and deserted by the wretch to whom you have attached yourself."

She looked on him with eyes in which anger sparkled through her tears, but only repeated the word "wretch!" with a scornful emphasis.

"Yes, *wretch*!" said Tressilian; "for were he aught better, why are you here, and alone in my apartment? why was not fitting provision made for your honourable reception?"

"In your apartment?" repeated Amy; "in *your* apartment? It shall instantly be relieved of my presence." She hastened towards the door; but the sad recollection of her deserted state at once pressed on her mind, and, pausing on the threshold, she added, in a tone unutterably pathetic, "Alas! I had forgot—I know not where to go——"

"I see—I see it all," said Tressilian, springing to her side, and leading her back to the seat, on which she sunk down—"You *do* need aid—you *do* need protection, though you will not own it; and you shall not need it long. Leaning on my arm, as the representative of your excellent and broken-hearted father, on the very threshold of the Castle-gate, you shall meet Elizabeth; and the first deed she shall do in the halls of Kenilworth shall be an act of justice to her sex and her subjects. Strong in my good cause, and in the Queen's justice, the power of her minion shall not shake my resolution. I will instantly seek Sussex."

"Not for all that is under heaven!" said the Countess, much alarmed, and feeling the absolute necessity of obtaining time, at least, for consideration. "Tressilian, you were wont to be generous—Grant me one request, and believe, if it be your wish to save me from misery, and from madness, you will do more by making me the promise I ask of you, than Elizabeth can do for me with all her power. I will speak as plainly as I dare—I am now awaiting the commands of one who has a right to issue them—The interference of a third person—of you in especial, Tressilian, will be ruin—utter ruin to me. Wait but four-and-twenty hours, and it may be that the poor Amy may have the means to show that she values, and can reward, your disinterested friendship—that she is happy herself, and has the means to make you so—Will you so far trust me?"

"I will, upon my honour," said Tressilian; "but when that space is expired——"

"When that space is expired," she said, interrupting him, "you are free to act as your judgment shall determine."

"Is there nought besides which I can do for you, Amy?" said Tressilian.

"Nothing," said she, "save to leave me,—that is, if—I blush to acknowledge my helplessness by asking it—if you can spare me the use of this apartment for the next twenty-four hours."

"This is most wonderful!" said Tressilian; "what hope or interest can you have in a castle, where you cannot command even an apartment?"

"Argue not, but leave me," she said; and added, as he slowly and unwillingly retired, "Generous Edmund! the time may come, when Amy may show she deserved thy noble attachment."

Tressilian, in strange agitation of mind, had hardly stepped down the first two or three steps of the winding staircase, when greatly to his surprise and displeasure, he met Michael Lambourne, wearing an impudent familiarity of visage, for which Tressilian felt much disposed to throw him downstairs; until he remembered the prejudice which Amy, the only object of his solicitude, was likely to receive from his engaging in any act of violence at that time, and in that place.

He therefore contented himself with looking sternly upon Lambourne, as upon one whom he deemed unworthy of notice, and attempted to pass him in his way downstairs without any symptom of recognition. But Lambourne, who, amidst the profusion of that day's hospitality, had not failed to take a deep, though not an overpowering cup of sack, was not in the humour of humbling himself before any man's looks. He stopped Tressilian upon the staircase without the least bashfulness or embarrassment, and addressed him as if he had been on kind and intimate terms :—"What, no grudge between us, I hope, upon old scores, Master Tressilian ?—nay, I am one who remember former kindness rather than latter feud—I'll convince you that I meant honestly and kindly, ay, and comfortably by you."

"I desire none of your intimacy," said Tressilian—"keep company with your mates."

"Now, see how hasty he is ! " said Lambourne : "and how these gentles, that are made questionless out of the porcelain clay of the earth, look down upon poor Michael Lambourne ! You would take Master Tressilian now for the most maid-like, modest, simpering squire of dames, that ever made love when candles were long i' the stuff—snuff, call you it ?—Why, you would play the saint on us, Master Tressilian, and forget that even now thou hast commodity in thy very bedchamber, to the shame of any lord's castle, ha ! ha ! ha ! Have I touched you, Master Tressilian ? "

"I know not what you mean," said Tressilian, inferring, however, too surely, that this licentious ruffian must have been sensible of Amy's presence in his apartment ; "but if," he continued, "thou art varlet of the chambers, and lackest a fee, there is one to leave mine unmolested."

Lambourne looked at the piece of gold, and put it in his pocket, saying—"Now, I know not but you might have done more with me by a kind word, than by this chiming rogue. But after all he pays well that pays with gold—and Mike Lambourne was never a make-bate, or a spoil-sport, or the like. E'en live and let others live, that is my motto—only, I would not let some folks cock their beaver at me neither, as if they were made of silver ore, and I of Dutch pewter. So if I keep your secret, Master Tressilian, you may look sweet on me at least ; and were I to want a little backing or countenance, being caught, as you see the best of us may be, in a sort of peccadillo—why, you owe it me—and so e'en make your chamber serve you and that same bird in bower beside—it's all one to Mike Lambourne."

"Make way, sir," said Tressilian, unable to bridle his indignation, "you have had your fee."

"Um ! " said Lambourne, giving place, however, while he sulkily muttered between his teeth, repeating Tressilian's words—"Make way—and you have had your fee—but it matters not, I will spoil no sport, as I said before; I am no dog in the manger—mind that."

He spoke louder and louder, as Tressilian, by whom he felt himself overawed, got farther and farther out of hearing.

"I am no dog in the manger—but I will not carry coals neither—mind that, my Master Tressilian; and I will have a peep at this wench, whom you have quartered so commodiously in your old haunted room—afraid of ghosts, belike, and not too willing to sleep alone. If *I* had done this now in a strange lord's castle, the word had been,—The porter's lodge for the knave! and—Have him flogged—trundle him down stairs like a turnip!—Ay, but your virtuous gentlemen take strange privileges over us, who are downright servants of our senses. Well—I have my Master Tressilian's head under my belt by this lucky discovery, that is one thing certain; and I will try to get a sight of this Lindabrides of his, that is another."

In the meantime, Tressilian walked into the outer yard of the Castle, scarce knowing what to think of his late strange and most unexpected interview with Amy Robsart, and dubious if he had done well, being intrusted with the delegated authority of her father, to pass his word so solemnly to leave her to her own guidance for so many hours. While he was thus balancing the advantages and perils which attended her unexpected presence in Kenilworth, Tressilian was hastily and anxiously accosted by Wayland, who, after ejaculating, "Thank God, your worship is found at last!" proceeded, with breathless caution, to pour into his ear the intelligence that the lady had escaped from Cumnor Place.

"And is at present in this Castle," said Tressilian; "I know it, and I have seen her—Was it by her own choice she found refuge in my apartment?"

"No," answered Wayland; "but I could think of no other way of safely bestowing her, and was but too happy to find a deputy-usher who knew where you were quartered. This lady knows not her own mind—she will have none of your aid—commands you not to be named to her—and is about to put herself into the hands of my Lord Leicester. It is not my purpose to abide an instant after delivery of the letter to Leicester, which waits but your commands to find its way to him. See, here it is—but no—a plague on it—I must have left it in my dog-hole, in the hay-loft yonder, where I am to sleep."

"Death and fury!" said Tressilian, transported beyond his usual patience; "thou hast not lost that on which may depend a stake more important than a thousand such lives—as thine?"

"Lost it!" answered Wayland, readily; "that were a jest indeed! No, sir, I have it carefully put up with my night-sack, and some matters I have occasion to use—I will fetch it in an instant."

"Do so," said Tressilian; "be faithful, and thou shalt be well rewarded. But if I have reason to suspect thee, a dead dog were in better case than thou!"

Wayland bowed, and took his leave with seeming confidence and alacrity, but, in fact, filled with the utmost dread and confusion. The letter was lost, that was certain, notwithstanding the apology which he had made to appease the impatient displeasure of Tressilian. It was lost—it might fall into wrong hands—it would then, certainly, occasion a discovery of the whole intrigue in which he had been engaged; nor, indeed, did Wayland see much prospect of its remaining concealed, in any event. He felt much hurt besides, at Tressilian's burst of impatience.

"Nay, if I am to be paid in this coin for services where my neck is concerned, it is time I should look to myself. Here have I offended, for aught I know, to the death, the lord of this stately castle, whose word were as powerful to take away my life, as the breath which speaks it to blow out a farthing candle. And all this for a mad lady, and a melancholy gallant; who, on the loss of a four-nooked bit of paper, has his hand on his poignado, and swears death and fury!—I will to her chamber, and tell her the fate which has befallen her letter, that she may write another if she list. She cannot lack a messenger, I trow, where there are so many lackeys that can carry a letter to their lord. And I will tell her also that I leave the Castle, trusting her to God, her own guidance, and Master Tressilian's care and looking after.—Perhaps she may remember the ring she offered me—it was well earned, I trow; but she is a lovely creature, and—marry hang the ring! I will not bear a base spirit for the matter. If I fare ill in this world for my good nature, I shall have better chance in the next.—So now for the lady, and then for the road."

With the stealthy step and jealous eye of the cat that steals on her prey, Wayland resumed the way to the Countess's chamber, sliding along by the side of the courts and passages, alike observant of all around him, and studious himself to escape observation. The artist congratulated himself on having escaped the various perils of his journey, and was in the act of ascending by two steps at once, when he observed that the shadow of a man, thrown from a door which stood ajar, darkened the opposite wall of the staircase. Wayland drew back cautiously, went down to the inner courtyard, spent about a quarter of an hour, which seemed at least quadruple its usual duration, in walking from place to place, and then returned to the tower, in hopes to find that the lurker had disappeared. He ascended as high as the suspicious spot—there was no shadow on the wall—he ascended a few yards farther—the door was still ajar, and he was doubtful whether to advance or retreat, when it was suddenly thrown wide open, and Michael Lambourne bolted out upon the astonished Wayland. "Who the devil art thou? and what seek'st thou in this part of the Castle? March into that chamber, and be hanged to thee!"

"I am no dog to go at every man's whistle," said the artist' affecting a confidence which was belied by a timid shake in his voice.

"Say'st thou me so?—Come hither, Lawrence Staples."

A huge ill-made and ill-looked fellow, upwards of six feet high, appeared at the door, and Lambourne proceeded: "If thou be'st so fond of this tower, my friend, thou shalt see its foundations, good twelve feet below the bed of the lake, and tenanted by certain jolly toads, snakes, and so forth, which thou wilt find mighty good company. Therefore once more I ask you, in fair play, who thou art, and what thou seek'st here?"

"If the dungeon-grate once clashes behind me," thought Wayland, "I am a gone man." He therefore answered submissively, "He was the poor juggler whom his honour had met yesterday in Weatherly-bottom."

"And what juggling trick art thou playing in this tower? Thy gang," said Lambourne, "lie over against Clinton's buildings."

"I came here to see my sister," said the juggler, "who is in Master Tressilian's chamber, just above."

"Aha!" said Lambourne, smiling, "here be truths! Upon my honour, for a stranger, this same Master Tressilian makes himself at home among us, and furnishes out his cell handsomely, with all sort of commodities. This will be a precious tale of the sainted Master Tressilian, and will be welcome to some folks, as a purse of broad pieces to me.—Hark ye, fellow," he continued, addressing Wayland, "thou shalt not give Puss a hint to steal away—we must catch her in her form. So, back with that pitiful sheep-biting visage of thine, or I will fling thee from the window of the tower, and try if your juggling skill can save thy bones."

"Your worship will not be so hard-hearted, I trust," said Wayland; "poor folk must live. I trust your honour will allow me to speak with my sister?"

"Sister on Adam's side, I warrant," said Lambourne; "or, if otherwise, the more knave thou. But, sister or no sister, thou diest on point of fox, if thou comest a-prying to this tower once more. And now I think of it—uds daggers and death!—I will see thee out of the Castle, for this is a more main concern than thy jugglery."

"But, please your worship," said Wayland, "I am to enact Arion in the pageant upon the lake this very evening."

"I will act it myself, by Saint Christopher!" said Lambourne—"Orion, call'st thou him?—I will act Orion, his belt, and his seven stars to boot. Come along, for a rascal knave as thou art—follow me!—Or stay—Lawrence, do thou bring him along."

Lawrence seized by the collar of the cloak the unresisting juggler, while Lambourne, with hasty steps, led the way to that same sallyport, or secret postern, by which Tressilian had returned to the Castle, and which opened in the western wall, at no great distance from Mervyn's Tower.

While traversing with a rapid foot the space betwixt the tower and the sallyport, Wayland in vain racked his brain for some device which might avail the poor lady, for whom, notwithstanding his own imminent danger, he felt deep interest. But when he was thrust out of the Castle, and informed by Lambourne, with a tremendous oath, that instant death would be the consequence of his again approaching it, he cast up his hands and eyes to heaven, as if to call God to witness he had stood to the uttermost in defence of the oppressed; then turned his back on the proud towers of Kenilworth, and went his way to seek a humbler and safer place of refuge.

XXI

TRESSILIAN, when Wayland had left him, as mentioned in the last chapter, remained uncertain what he ought next to do, when Raleigh and Blount came up to him arm in arm, yet, according to their wont, very eagerly disputing together. Tressilian had no great desire for their society in the present state of his feelings, but there was no possibility of avoiding them; and indeed he felt that, bound by his promise not to approach Amy, or take any step in her behalf, it would be his best course at once to mix with general society, and to exhibit on his brow as little as he could of the anguish and uncertainty which sat heavy at his heart. He therefore made a virtue of necessity, and hailed his comrades with, "All mirth to you, gentlemen. Whence come ye?"

"From Warwick, to be sure," said Blount; "we must needs home to change our habits, like poor players, who are fain to multiply their persons to outward appearance by change of suits; and you had better do the like, Tressilian."

"Blount is right," said Raleigh; "the Queen loves such marks of deference, and notices, as wanting in respect, those who, not arriving in her immediate attendance, may appear in their soiled and ruffled riding-dress. Why gettest thou not on thy braveries, Tressilian?"

"I am excluded from my apartment by a silly mistake," said Tressilian, "and separated for the time from my baggage. I was about to seek thee, to beseech a share of thy lodging."

"And welcome," said Raleigh; "it is a noble one. My Lord of Leicester has done us that kindness, and lodged us in princely fashion. If his courtesy be extorted reluctantly, it is at least extended far. I would advise you to tell your strait to the Earl's chamberlain—you will have instant redress."

"Nay, it is not worth while, since you can spare me room," replied Tressilian—"I would not be troublesome.—Has anyone come hither with you?"

"Oh, ay," said Blount; "Varney and a whole tribe of Leicesterians, besides about a score of us honest Sussex folk. We are all, it seems, to receive the Queen at what they call the Gallery Tower, and witness some fooleries there; and then we're to remain in attendance upon the Queen in the Great Hall—God bless the mark—while those who are now waiting upon her Grace get rid of their slough, and doff their riding-suits. Heaven help me, if her Grace should speak to me, I shall never know what to answer!"

"And what has detained them so long at Warwick?" said Tressilian, unwilling that their conversation should return to his own affairs.

"Such a succession of fooleries," said Blount, "as were never seen at Bartholomew fair. We have had speeches and players, and dogs and bears, and men making monkeys, and women moppets, of themselves—I marvel the Queen could endure it. But ever and anon came in something of 'the lovely light of her gracious countenance,' or some such trash. Ah! vanity makes a fool of the wisest."

His further meditations were interrupted by a shout of applause from the multitude, so tremendously vociferous, that the country echoed for miles round. The guards, thickly stationed upon the road by which the Queen was to advance, caught up the acclamation, which ran like wildfire to the Castle, and announced to all within that Queen Elizabeth had entered the Royal Chase of Kenilworth. The whole music of the Castle sounded at once, and a round of artillery, with a salvo of small arms, was discharged from the battlements; but the noise of drums and trumpets, and even of the cannon themselves, was but faintly heard amidst the roaring and reiterated welcomes of the multitude.

As the noise began to abate, a broad glare of light was seen to appear from the gate of the Park, and, broadening and brightening as it came nearer, advanced along the open and fair avenue that led towards the Gallery Tower; and which, as we have already noticed, was lined on either hand by the retainers of the Earl of Leicester. The word was passed along the line, "The Queen! The Queen! Silence, and stand fast!" Onward came the cavalcade, illuminated by two hundred thick waxen torches, in the hands of as many horsemen, which cast a light like that of broad day all around the procession, but especially on the principal group, of which the Queen herself, arrayed in the most splendid manner, and blazing with jewels, formed the central figure. She was mounted on a milk-white horse, which she reined with peculiar grace and dignity; and in the whole of her stately and noble carriage you saw the daughter of an hundred kings.

The ladies of the court who rode beside her Majesty had taken especial care that their own external appearance should not be more glorious than their rank and the occasion altogether demanded, so that no inferior luminary might appear to approach the orbit of royalty. But their personal charms, and the magnificence by which, under every prudential restraint, they were necessarily distinguished, exhibited them as the very flower of a realm so far famed for splendour and beauty. The magnificence of the courtiers, free from such restraints as prudence imposed on the ladies, was yet more unbounded.

Leicester, who glittered like a golden image with jewels and cloth of gold, rode on her Majesty's right hand, as well in quality of her host as of her Master of the Horse. He was bare-headed, as were all the courtiers in the train; and the red torchlight shone upon his long curled tresses of dark hair, and on his noble features, to the beauty of which even the severest criticism could only object the lordly fault, as it may be termed, of a forehead somewhat too high. On that proud evening, those features wore all the grateful solicitude of a subject, to show himself sensible of the high honour which the Queen was conferring on him, and all the pride and satisfaction which became so glorious a moment. Yet, though neither eye nor feature betrayed aught but feelings which suited the occasion, some of the Earl's personal attendants remarked, that he was unusually pale, and they expressed to each other their fear that he was taking more fatigue than consisted with his health.

The train, male and female, who attended immediately upon the Queen's person, were of course of the bravest and the fairest,—the highest born nobles, and the wisest counsellors, of that distinguished reign, to repeat whose names were but to weary the reader. Behind came a long crowd of knights and gentlemen, whose rank and birth, however distinguished, were thrown into shade, as their persons into the rear of a procession, whose front was of such august majesty.

Thus marshalled, the cavalcade approached the Gallery Tower, which formed, as we have often observed, the extreme barrier of the Castle.

Elizabeth received most graciously the homage of the Herculean porter, and, bending her head to him in requital, passed through his guarded tower, from the top of which was poured a clamorous blast of warlike music, which was replied to by other bands of minstrelsy placed at different points on the Castle walls, and by others again stationed in the Chase; while the tones of the one, as they yet vibrated on the echoes, were caught up and answered by new harmony from different quarters.

Amidst these bursts of music, which, as if the work of enchantment, seemed now close at hand, now softened by distant space, now wailing so low and sweet as if that distance were gradually prolonged until only the last lingering strains could reach the ear, Queen Elizabeth crossed the Gallery

Tower, and came upon the long bridge, which extended from thence to Mortimer's Tower, and which was already as light as day, so many torches had been fastened to the palisades on either side. Most of the nobles here alighted, and sent their horses to the neighbouring village of Kenilworth, following the Queen on foot, as did the gentlemen who had stood in array to receive her at the Gallery Tower.

At the same time that the Queen was about to enter the Castle, that memorable discharge of fireworks, by water and land, took place, which Master Laneham, formerly introduced to the reader, has strained all his eloquence to describe.

"Such," says the Clerk of the Council-chamber door, "was the blaze of burning darts, the gleams of stars coruscant, the streams and hail of fiery sparks, lightnings of wildfire, and flight-shot of thunder-bolts, with continuance, terror, and vehemency, that the heavens thundered, the waters surged, and the earth shook; and, for my part, hardy as I am, it made me very vengeably afraid."

It is by no means our purpose to detail minutely all the princely festivities of Kenilworth, after the fashion of Master Robert Laneham. It is sufficient to say, that, under discharge of the splendid fireworks, which we have borrowed Laneham's eloquence to describe, the Queen entered the base-court of Kenilworth through Mortimer's Tower, and moving on through pageants of heathen gods and heroes of antiquity, who offered gifts and compliments on the bended knee, at length found her way to the great hall of the Castle, gorgeously hung for her reception with the richest silken tapestry, misty with perfumes, and sounding to strains of soft and delicious music. From the highly-carved oaken roof hung a superb chandelier of gilt bronze, formed like a spread eagle, whose outstretched wings supported three male and three female figures, grasping a pair of branches in each hand. The hall was thus illuminated by twenty-four torches of wax. At the upper end of the splendid apartment was a state canopy, overshadowing a royal throne, and beside was a door, which opened to a long suite of apartments, decorated with the utmost magnificence for the Queen and her ladies, whenever it should be her pleasure to be private.

The Earl of Leicester having handed the Queen up to her throne, and seated her there, knelt down before her, and kissing the hand which she held out, with an air in which romantic and respectful gallantry was happily mingled with the air of loyal devotion, he thanked her, in terms of the deepest gratitude, for the highest honour which a sovereign could render to a subject. So handsome did he look when kneeling before her, that Elizabeth was tempted to prolong the scene a little longer than there was, strictly speaking, necessity for; and ere she raised him, she passed her hand over his head, so near, as almost to touch his long curled and perfumed hair, and with a movement of fondness, that seemed to intimate, she would, if she dared, have made the motion a slight caress.

She at length raised him, and, standing beside the throne, he explained to her the various preparations which had been made for her amusement and accommodation, all of which received her prompt and gracious approbation. The Earl then prayed her Majesty for permission, that he himself, and the nobles who had been in attendance upon her during the journey, might retire for a few minutes, and put themselves into a guise more fitting for dutiful attendance, during which space, those gentlemen of worship (pointing to Varney, Blount, Tressilian, and others), who had already put themselves into fresh attire, would have the honour of keeping her presence-chamber.

"Be it so, my lord," answered the Queen; "you could manage a theatre well, who can thus command a double set of actors. For ourselves, we will receive your courtesies this evening but clownishly, since it is not our purpose to change our riding attire, being in effect something fatigued with a journey which the concourse of our good people hath rendered slow, though the love they have shown our person hath, at the same time, made it delightful."

Leicester, having received this permission, retired accordingly, and was followed by those nobles who had attended the Queen to Kenilworth in person. The gentleman who had preceded them, and were of course dressed for the solemnity, remained in attendance. But being most of them of rather inferior rank, they remained at an awful distance from the throne which Elizabeth occupied. The Queen's sharp eye soon distinguished Raleigh amongst them, with one or two others who were personally known to her, and she instantly made them a sign to approach, and accosted them very graciously. Raleigh, in particular, the adventure of whose cloak, as well as the incident of the verses, remained on her mind, was very graciously received; and to him she most frequently applied for information concerning the names and rank of those who were in presence. These he communicated concisely, and not without some traits of humorous satire, by which Elizabeth seemed much amused. "And who is yonder clownish fellow?" she said, looking at Tressilian, whose soiled dress on this occasion greatly obscured his good mien.

"Tressilian is his name," said Raleigh, with internal reluctance, for he foresaw nothing favourable to his friend from the manner in which she took notice of him.

"Tressilian!" answered Elizabeth. "Oh, the Menelaus of our romance! Why, he has dressed himself in a guise that will go far to exculpate his fair and false Helen. I doubt this fair run-away hath had reasons for breaking her faith."

To this Raleigh durst make no answer, aware how little he should benefit Tressilian by contradicting the Queen's sentiments, and not at all certain on the whole, whether the best thing that could befall him, would not be that she should put an end at once by her authority to this affair, upon which it seemed to him Tressilian's thoughts were fixed with unavailing and distressing pertinacity. As these reflections passed through his active brain, the lower door of the hall opened, and Leicester, accompanied by several of his kinsmen, and of the nobles who had embraced his faction, re-entered the Castle-hall.

Elizabeth received him with great complacency. "We have one piece of royal justice," she said, "to attend to. It is a piece of justice, too, which interests us as a woman, as well in the character of mother and guardian of the English people."

An involuntary shudder came over Leicester, as he bowed low, expressive of his readiness to receive her royal commands; and a similar cold fit came over Varney whose eyes (seldom during that evening removed from his patron) instantly perceived, from the change in his looks, slight as that was, of what the Queen was speaking. But Leicester had wrought his resolution up to the point which, in his crooked policy, he judged necessary; and when Elizabeth added—"It is of the matter of Varney and Tressilian we speak—is the lady here, my lord?" his answer was ready; —"Gracious madam, she is not."

Elizabeth bent her brows and compressed her lips. "Our orders were strict and positive, my lord," was her answer——

"And should have been obeyed, good my liege," replied Leicester, "had they been expressed in the form of the lightest wish. But—Varney, step forward—this gentleman will inform your Grace of the cause why the lady" (he could not force his rebellious tongue to utter the words—*his wife*) "cannot attend on your royal presence."

Varney advanced, and pleaded with readiness, what indeed he firmly believed, the absolute incapacity of the party (for neither did he dare, in Leicester's presence, term her his wife) to wait on her Grace.

"Here," said he, "are attestations from a most learned physician, whose skill and honour are well known to my good

Lord of Leicester; and from an honest and devout Protestant, a man of credit and substance, one Anthony Foster, the gentleman in whose house she is at present bestowed, that she now labours under an illness which altogether unfits her for such a journey as betwixt this Castle and the neighbourhood of Oxford."

"This alters the matter," said the Queen, taking the certificates in her hand, and glancing at their contents—"Let Tressilian come forward.—Master Tressilian, we have much sympathy for your situation, the rather that you seem to have set your heart deeply on this Amy Robsart, or Varney. Our power, thanks to God, and the willing obedience of a loving people, is worth much, but there are some things which it cannot compass. We cannot, for example, command the affections of a giddy young girl, or make her love sense and learning better than a courtier's fine doublet; and we cannot control sickness, with which it seems this lady is afflicted, who may not, by reason of such infirmity, attend our court here, as we had required her to do. Here are the testimonials of the physician who hath her under his charge, and the gentleman in whose house she resides, so setting forth."

"Under your Majesty's favour," said Tressilian, hastily, and, in his alarm for the consequence of the imposition practised on the Queen, forgetting, in part at least, his own promise to Amy, "these certificates speak not the truth."

"How, sir!" said the Queen—"Impeach my Lord of Leicester's veracity! methinks these writings, being produced in the presence of the noble Earl to whom this Castle pertains, and his honour being appealed to as the guarantee of their authenticity, might be evidence enough for thee. But since thou lists to be so formal—Varney, or rather my Lord of Leicester, for the affair becomes yours" (these words, though spoken at random, thrilled through the Earl's marrow and bones), "what evidence have you as touching these certificates?"

Varney hastened to reply, preventing Leicester,—"So please your Majesty, my young Lord of Oxford, who is here in presence, knows Master Anthony Foster's hand and his character."

The Earl of Oxford, a young unthrift, whom Foster had more than once accommodated with loans on usurious interest, acknowledged, on this appeal, that he knew him as a wealthy and independent franklin, supposed to be worth much money, and verified the certificate produced to be his handwriting.

"And now, I trust, Master Tressilian, this matter is ended," said the Queen. "We will do something ere the night is older to reconcile old Sir Hugh Robsart to the match. You have done your duty something more than boldly; but we were no woman had we not compassion for the wounds which true love deals; so we forgive your audacity, and your uncleansed boots withal, which have well-nigh overpowered my Lord of Leicester's perfumes."

So spoke Elizabeth, whose nicety of scent was one of the characteristics of her organisation, as appeared long afterwards when she expelled Essex from her presence, on a charge against his boots similar to that which she now expressed against those of Tressilian.

But Tressilian had by this time collected himself, astonished as he had at first been by the audacity of the falsehood so feasibly supported, and placed in array against the evidence of his own eyes. He rushed forward, kneeled down, and caught the Queen by the skirt of the robe. "As you are Christian woman," he said, "madam, as you are crowned Queen, to do equal justice among your subjects—as you hope yourself to have fair hearing (which God grant you) at that last bar at which we must all plead, grant me one small request! Decide not this matter so hastily. Give me but twenty-four hours' interval, and I will, at the end of that brief space, produce evidence which will show to demonstration, that these certificates, which state this unhappy lady to be now ill at ease in Oxfordshire, are false as hell!"

"Let go my train, sir!" said Elizabeth, who was startled at his vehemence, though she had too much of the lion in her to fear; "the fellow must be distraught—that witty knave, my godson Harrington, must have him into his rhymes of Orlando Furioso!—And yet, by this light, there is something strange in the vehemence of his demand.—Speak, Tressilian; what wilt thou do if, at the end of these four-and-twenty hours, thou canst not confute a fact so solemnly proved as this lady's illness?"

"I will lay down my head on the block," answered Tressilian.

"Pshaw!" replied the Queen. "God's light! thou speak'st like a fool. What head falls in England but by just sentence of English law?—I ask thee, man—if thou hast sense to understand me—wilt thou, if thou shalt fail in this improbable attempt of thine, render me a good and sufficient reason why thou dost undertake it?"

Tressilian paused, and again hesitated; because he felt convinced that if, within the interval demanded, Amy should become reconciled to her husband, he would in that case do her the worst offices by again ripping up the whole circumstances before Elizabeth, and showing how that wise and jealous princess had been imposed upon by false testimonials.

The consciousness of this dilemma renewed his extreme embarrassment of look, voice, and manner; he hesitated, looked down, and on the Queen repeating her question with a stern voice and flashing eye, he admitted with faltering words, "That it might be—he could not positively—that is, in certain events—explain the reasons and grounds on which he acted."

"Now, by the soul of King Henry," said the Queen, "this is either moonstruck madness, or very knavery!—Seest thou, Raleigh, thy friend is far too Pindaric for this presence. Have him away, and make us quit of him, or it shall be the worse for him; for his flights are too unbridled for any place but Parnassus, or Saint Luke's Hospital. But come back instantly thyself, when he is placed under fitting restraint.—We wish we had seen the beauty which could make such havoc in a wise man's brain."

Tressilian, without farther resistance or expostulation, followed, or rather suffered himself to be conducted by Blount to Raleigh's lodging, where he was formally installed into a small truckle-bed, placed in a wardrobe, and designed for a domestic. He saw but too plainly, that no remonstrances would avail to procure the help or sympathy of his friends, until the lapse of the time for which he had pledged himself to remain inactive, should enable him either to explain the whole circumstances to them, or remove from him every pretext or desire of farther interference with the fortunes of Amy, by her having found means to place herself in a state of reconciliation with her husband.

With great difficulty, and only by the most patient and mild remonstrances with Blount, he escaped the disgrace and mortification of having two of Sussex's stoutest yeomen quartered in his apartment. At last, however, when Nicholas had seen him fairly deposited in his truckle-bed, he contented himself with the modified measure of locking the door on the unfortunate Tressilian, whose gallant and disinterested efforts to save a female who had treated him with ingratitude, thus terminated for the present, in the displeasure of his Sovereign, and the conviction of his friends that he was little better than a madman.

XXII

"It is a melancholy matter," said the Queen, when Tressilian was withdrawn, "to see a wise and learned man's wit thus pitifully unsettled. Yet this public display of his imperfection of brain plainly shows us that his supposed injury and accusation were fruitless; and therefore, my lord of Leicester, we remember your suit formerly made to us in behalf of your faithful servant Varney, whose good gifts and fidelity, as they are useful to you, ought to have due reward from us, knowing well that your lordship, and all you have, are so earnestly devoted to our service. And we render Varney the honour more especially that we are a guest, and we fear a chargeable and troublesome one, under your lordship's roof; and also for the satisfaction of the good old Knight of Devon, Sir Hugh Robsart, whose daughter he hath married; and we trust the especial mark of grace which we are about to confer may reconcile him to his son-in-law.—Your sword, my Lord of Leicester."

The Earl unbuckled his sword, and taking it by the point, presented on bending knee the hilt to Elizabeth.

She took it slowly, drew it from the scabbard, and while the ladies who stood around turned away their eyes with real or affected shuddering, she noted with a curious eye the high polish and rich damasked ornaments upon the glittering blade.

"Had I been a man," she said, "methinks none of my ancestors would have loved a good sword better. Richard Varney, come forth, and kneel down. In the name of God and Saint George, we dub thee knight! Be Faithful, Brave, and Fortunate.—Arise, Sir Richard Varney."

Varney arose and retired, making a deep obeisance to the Sovereign who had done him so much honour.

"The buckling of the spur, and what other rites remain," said the Queen, "may be finished to-morrow in the chapel; for we intend Sir Richard Varney a companion in his honours. And as we must not be partial in conferring such distinction, we mean on this matter to confer with our cousin of Sussex."

That noble Earl, who, since his arrival at Kenilworth, and indeed since the commencement of this Progress, had found himself in a subordinate situation to Leicester, was now wearing a heavy cloud on his brow—a circumstance which had not escaped the Queen, who hoped to appease his discontent, and to follow out her system of balancing policy by a mark of peculiar favour, the more gratifying as it was tendered at a moment when his rival's triumph appeared to be complete.

At the summons of Queen Elizabeth, Sussex hastily approached her person; and being asked on which of his followers, being a gentleman and of merit, he would wish the honour of knighthood to be conferred, he answered, with more sincerity than policy, that he would have ventured to speak for Tressilian, to whom he conceived he owed his own life, and who was a distinguished soldier and scholar, besides a man of unstained lineage, "only," he said, "he feared the events of that night"—— And then he stopped.

"I am glad your lordship is thus considerate," said Elizabeth; "the events of this night would make us, in the eyes of our subjects, as mad as this poor brain-sick gentleman himself—for we ascribe his conduct to no malice—should we choose this moment to do him grace."

"In that case," said the Earl of Sussex, somewhat discountenanced, "your Majesty will allow me to name my master of the horse, Master Nicholas Blount, a gentleman of fair estate and ancient name, who has served your Majesty both in Scotland and Ireland, and brought away bloody marks on his person, all honourably taken and requited."

The Queen could not help shrugging her shoulders slightly even at this second suggestion; and the Duchess of Rutland, who read in the Queen's manner that she had expected Sussex would have named Raleigh, and thus would have enabled her to gratify her own wish while she honoured his recommendation, only waited the Queen's assent to what he had proposed, and then said, that she hoped, since these two high nobles had been each permitted to suggest a candidate for the honours of chivalry, she, in behalf of the ladies in presence, might have a similar indulgence.

"I were no woman to refuse you such a boon," said the Queen, smiling.

"Then," pursued the Duchess, "in the name of these fair ladies present, I request your Majesty to confer the rank of knighthood on Walter Raleigh, whose birth, deeds of arms, and promptitude to serve our sex with sword or pen, deserve such distinction from us all."

"Gramercy, fair ladies," said Elizabeth, smiling, "your boon is granted, and the gentle squire Lack-Cloak shall become the good knight Lack-Cloak, at your desire. Let the two aspirants for the honour of chivalry step forward."

Blount was not as yet returned from seeing Tressilian, as he conceived, safely disposed of; but Raleigh came forth, and kneeling down, received at the hand of the Virgin Queen that title of honour, which was never conferred on a more distinguished or more illustrious object.

Shortly afterwards Nicholas Blount entered, and, hastily apprised by Sussex, who met him at the door of the hall, of the Queen's gracious purpose regarding him, he was desired to advance towards the throne. The Queen conferred on poor Blount the honour of knighthood with a marked sense of reluctance. That wise Princess was fully aware of the propriety of using great circumspection and economy in bestowing those titles of honour, which the Stewarts, who succeeded to her throne, distributed with an imprudent liberality, which greatly diminished their value. Blount had no sooner arisen and retired than she turned to the Duchess of Rutland, "Our woman wit," she said, "dear Rutland, is sharper than that of those proud things in doublet and hose. Seest thou, out of these three knights, thine is the only true metal to stamp chivalry's imprint upon?"

"Sir Richard Varney, surely—the friend of my Lord of Leicester—surely *he* has merit," replied the Duchess.

"Varney has a sly countenance, and a smooth tongue," replied the Queen. "I fear me he will prove a knave—but the promise was of ancient standing. My Lord of Sussex must have lost his own wits, I think, to recommend to us first a madman like Tressilian, and then a clownish fool like this other fellow. I protest, Rutland, that while he sat on his knees before me, mopping and mowing, as if he had scalding porridge in his mouth, I had much ado to forbear cutting him over the pate, instead of striking his shoulder."

"Your Majesty gave him a smart *accolade*," said the Duchess; "we who stood behind heard the blade clatter on his collar-bone, and the poor man fidgeted too as if he felt it."

"I could not help it, wench," said the Queen, laughing; "but we will have this same Sir Nicholas sent to Ireland or Scotland, or somewhere, to rid our court of so antic a chevalier; he may be a good soldier in the field, though a preposterous ass in a banqueting hall."

The discourse became then more general, and soon after there was a summons to the banquet. It is unnecessary to say anything farther of the festivities of the evening, which were so brilliant in themselves, and received with such obvious and willing satisfaction by the Queen, that Leicester retired to his own apartment, with all the giddy raptures of successful ambition. Varney, who had changed his splendid attire, and now waited on his patron in a very modest and plain undress, attended to do the honours of the Earl's *coucher*.

"How! Sir Richard," said Leicester, smiling, "your new rank scarce suits the humility of this attendance."

"I would disown that rank, my lord," said Varney, "could I think it was to remove me to a distance from your lordship's person."

"Thou art a grateful fellow," said Leicester; "but I must not allow you to do what would abate you in the opinion of others."

While thus speaking, he still accepted, without hesitation, the offices about his person, which the new-made knight seemed to render as eagerly as if he had really felt, in discharging the task, that pleasure which his words expressed.

"I am not afraid of men's misconstruction," he said, in answer to Leicester's remark, "since there is not—(permit me to undo the collar)—a man within the Castle, who does not expect very soon to see persons of a rank far superior to that which, by your goodness, I now hold, rendering the duties of the bed-chamber to you, and accounting it an honour. The beautiful partner, whom you have chosen for true love, has your secret hours of relaxation and affection. Her fame is safe—her conscience may slumber securely—You have wealth to provide royally for your issue, should heaven bless you with offspring. Meanwhile you may give to Elizabeth ten times the leisure, and ten thousand times the affection, that ever Don Philip of Spain spared to her sister Mary; yet you know how she doated on him though so cold and neglectful. It requires but a close mouth and an open brow, and you keep your Eleanor and your fair Rosamond far enough separate.—Leave me to build you a bower to which no jealous Queen shall find a clue."

Leicester was silent for a moment, then sighed, and said, "It is impossible.—Good-night, Sir Richard Varney—yet stay—Can you guess what meant Tressilian by showing himself in such careless guise before the Queen to-day?—to strike her tender heart, I should guess, with all the sympathies due to a lover, abandoned by his mistress, and abandoning himself."

Varney, smothering a sneering laugh, answered, "He believed Master Tressilian had no such matter in his head."

"How!" said Leicester; "what mean'st thou? There is ever knavery in that laugh of thine, Varney."

"I only meant, my lord," said Varney, "that Tressilian has taken the sure way to avoid heart-breaking. He hath had a companion—a female companion—a mistress—a sort of player's wife or sister, as I believe,—with him in Mervyn's Bower, where I quartered him for certain reasons of my own."

"A mistress!—mean'st thou a paramour?"

"Ay, my lord; what female else waits for hours in a gentleman's chamber?"

"By my faith, time and space fitting, this were a good tale to tell," said Leicester. "I ever distrusted those bookish, hypocritical, seeming-virtuous scholars. Well, Master Tressilian makes somewhat familiar with my house—if I look it over, he is indebted to it for certain recollections. I would not harm him more than I can help. Keep eye on him, however, Varney."

"I lodged him for that reason," said Varney, "in Mervyn's Tower, where he is under the eye of my very vigilant, if he were not also my very drunken, servant, Michael Lambourne, whom I have told your Grace of."

"Grace!" said Leicester; "what mean'st thou by that epithet?"

"It came unawares, my lord; and yet it sounds so very natural, that I cannot recall it."

"It is thine own preferment that hath turned thy brain," said Leicester, laughing; "new honours are as heady as new wine."

"May your lordship soon have cause to say so from experience," said Varney; and wishing his patron good-night, he withdrew.

XXIII

WE are now to return to Mervyn's Bower, the apartment, or rather the prison, of the unfortunate Countess of Leicester, who for some time kept within bounds her uncertainty and her impatience. She was aware that, in the tumult of the day, there might be some delay ere her letter could be safely conveyed to the hands of Leicester, and that some time more might elapse ere he could extricate himself from the necessary attendance on Elizabeth to come and visit her in her secret bower. There was hope that Leicester might come to her apartment as soon as the revel in the Castle had subsided; but there was also risk she might be disturbed by some unauthorised intruder. She had lost confidence in the key, since Tressilian had entered so easily, though the door was locked on the inside; yet all the additional security she could think of, was to place the table across the door, that she might be warned by the noise, should any one attempt to enter. Having taken these necessary precautions, the unfortunate lady withdrew to her couch, stretched herself down on it, mused in anxious expectation, and counted more than one hour after midnight, till exhausted nature proved too strong for love, for grief, for fear, nay, even for uncertainty, and she slept.

The Countess awoke to hear a bugle-note, or rather the combined breath of many bugles, sounding not the *mort*, but the jolly *réveillé*, to remind the inmates of the Castle of Kenilworth that the pleasures of the day were to commence with a magnificent stag-hunting in the neighbouring Chase. Amy started up from her couch, listened to the sound, saw the first beams of the summer morning already twinkle through the lattice of her window, and recollected, with feelings of giddy agony, where she was, and how circumstanced.

"He thinks not of *me*," she said—"he will not come nigh me! A Queen is his guest, and what cares he in what corner of his huge Castle a wretch like me pines in doubt, which is fast fading into despair?" At once a sound at the door, as of some one attempting to open it softly, filled her with an ineffable mixture of joy and fear; and, hastening to remove the obstacle she had placed against the door, and to unlock it, she had the precaution to ask, "Is it thou, my love?"

"Yes, my Countess," murmured a whisper in reply.

She threw open the door, and exclaiming "Leicester!" flung her arms around the neck of the man who stood without, muffled in his cloak.

"No—not quite Leicester," answered Michael Lambourne, for he it was, returning the caress with vehemence,—"not quite Leicester, my lovely and most loving duchess, but as good a man."

With an exertion of force, of which she would at another time have thought herself incapable, the Countess freed herself from the profane and profaning grasp of the drunken debauchee, and retreated into the midst of her apartment, where despair gave her courage to make a stand.

"Stand back!" said the Countess; "do not approach nearer to me on thy peril!"

"My peril!—and stand back!—Why, how now, madam? Must you have a better mate than honest Mike Lambourne? I have been in America, girl, where the gold grows, and have brought off such a load on't——"

"Good friend," said the Countess, in great terror at the ruffian's determined and audacious manner, "I prithee begone, and leave me."

"And so I will, pretty one, when we are tired of each other's company—not a jot sooner."—He seized her by the arm, while, incapable of farther defence, she uttered shriek upon shriek. "Nay, scream away if you like it," said he, still holding her fast; "I have heard the sea at the loudest, and I mind a squalling woman no more than a miauling kitten—Damn me!—I have heard fifty or a hundred screaming at once, when there was a town stormed."

The cries of the Countess, however, brought unexpected aid, in the person of Lawrence Staples, who had heard her exclamations from his apartment below, and entered in good time to save her from being discovered, if not from more atrocious violence. Lawrence was drunk also from the debauch of the preceding night, but fortunately his intoxication had taken a different turn from that of Lambourne.

"What the devil's noise is this in the ward?" he said—"What! man and woman together in the same cell? that is against rule. I will have decency under my rule, by Saint Peter of the Fetters!"

"I'll make a blood-pudding of thy midriff first," answered Lambourne, laying his left hand on his dagger, but still detaining the Countess by the arm with his right—"So have at thee, thou old ostrich, whose only living is upon a bunch of iron keys!"

Lawrence raised the arm of Michael, and prevented him from drawing his dagger; and as Lambourne struggled and strove to shake him off, the Countess made a sudden exertion on her side, and slipping her hand out of the glove on which the ruffian still kept hold, she gained her liberty, and escaping from the apartment, ran down stairs; while at the same moment, she heard the two combatants fall on the floor with a noise which increased her terror. The outer wicket offered no impediment to her flight, having been opened for Lambourne's admittance; so that she succeeded in escaping down the stair, and fled into the Pleasance, which seemed to her hasty glance the direction in which she was most likely to avoid pursuit.

Meanwhile, Lawrence and Lambourne rolled on the floor of the apartment, closely grappled together. Neither had, happily, opportunity to draw their daggers; but Lawrence found space enough to dash his heavy keys across Michael's face, and Michael, in return, grasped the turnkey so felly by the throat, that the blood gushed from nose and mouth; so that they were both gory and filthy spectacles, when one of the other officers of the household, attracted by the noise of the fray, entered the room, and with some difficulty effected the separation of the combatants.

"A murrain on you both," said the charitable mediator, "and especially on you. Master Lambourne! What the fiend lie you here for, fighting on the floor like two butcher's curs in the kennel of the shambles?"

Lambourne arose, and somewhat sobered by the interposition of a third party, looked with something less than his usual brazen impudence of visage; "We fought for a wench, an thou must know," was his reply.

"A wench! Where is she?" said the officer.

"Why, vanished, I think," said Lambourne, looking around him; "unless Lawrence hath swallowed her. That filthy paunch of his devours as many distressed damsels and oppressed orphans as e'er a giant in King Arthur's history: they are his prime food; he worries them body, soul, and substance."

"I think you are all mad this morning," said the sewer; "I saw no woman here, nor no man neither in a proper sense, but only two beasts rolling on the floor."

"Nay, then, I am undone," said the jailor; "the prison's broken, that is all. Kenilworth prison is broken," he continued, in a tone of maudlin lamentation, "which was the strongest jail betwixt this and the Welsh marches—ay, and a house that has had knights, and earls, and kings sleeping in it, as secure as if they had been in the Tower of London. It is broken, the prisoners fled, and the jailor in much danger of being hanged!"

So saying, he retreated down to his own den, to conclude his lamentations, or to sleep himself sober. Lambourne and the sewer followed him close, and it was well for them, since the jailor, out of mere habit, was about to lock the wicket after him; and had they not been within the reach of interfering, they would have had the pleasure of being shut up in the turret-chamber, from which the Countess had been just delivered.

That unhappy lady, as soon as she found herself at liberty, fled, as we have already mentioned, into the Pleasance. She had seen this richly ornamented space of ground from the window of Mervyn's Tower; and it occurred to her at the moment of her escape, that among its numerous arbours, bowers, fountains, statues, and grottoes, she might find some recess, in which she could lie concealed until she had an opportunity of addressing herself to a protector, to whom she might communicate as much as she dared of her forlorn situation, and through whose means she might supplicate an interview with her husband.

The retreat which she had chosen gave her the easy alternative of avoiding observation. It was but stepping back to the farthest recess of a grotto, ornamented with rustic work and moss-seats, and terminated by a fountain, and she might easily remain concealed, or at her pleasure discover herself to any solitary wanderer whose curiosity might lead him to that romantic retirement. The fountain, acting both as a mirror and ewer, afforded Amy the means of a brief toilette, of which she availed herself as hastily as possible; then took in her hand her small casket of jewels, in case she might find them useful intercessors, and retiring to the darkest and most sequestered nook, sat down on a seat of moss, and awaited till fate should give her some chance of rescue, or of propitiating an intercessor.

It chanced upon that memorable morning, that one of the earliest of the huntress train, who appeared from her chamber in full array for the Chase, was the Princess, for whom all these pleasures were instituted, England's Maiden Queen. I know not if it were by chance, or out of the befitting courtesy due to a mistress by whom he was so much honoured, that she had scarcely made one step beyond the threshold of her chamber ere Leicester was by her side, and proposed to her, until the preparations for the Chase had been completed, to view the Pleasance, and the gardens which it connected with the Castle-yard.

To this new scene of pleasures they walked, the Earl's arm affording his Sovereign the occasional support which she required, where flights of steps, then a favourite ornament in a garden, conducted them from terrace to terrace, and from parterre to parterre. The conversation of Elizabeth and the favourite Earl has not reached us in detail. But those who watched at some distance (and the eyes of courtiers and court ladies are right sharp) were of opinion, that on no occasion did the dignity of Elizabeth, in gesture and motion, seem so decidedly to soften away into a mien expressive of indecision and tenderness. Her step was not only slow, but even unequal, a thing most unwonted in her carriage; her looks seemed bent on the ground, and there was a timid disposition to withdraw from her companion, which external gesture in females often indicates exactly the opposite tendency in the secret mind. The progress of private conversation, betwixt two persons of different sexes, is often decisive of their fate, and gives it a turn very different perhaps from what they themselves anticipated. Gallantry becomes mingled with conversation, and affection and passion come gradually to mix with gallantry. Nobles, as well as shepherd swains, will, in such a trying moment, say more than they intended; and Queens, like village maidens, will listen longer than they should.

Horses in the meanwhile neighed, and champed the bits with impatience in the base-court; hounds yelled in their couples, and yeomen, rangers, and prickers, lamented the exhaling of the dew, which would prevent the scent from lying. But Leicester had another chase in view, or, to speak more justly towards him, had become engaged in it without premeditation, as the high-spirited hunter which follows the cry of the hounds that have crossed his path by accident. The Queen—an accomplished and handsome woman—the pride of England, the hope of France and Holland, and the dread of Spain, had probably listened with more than usual favour to that mixture of romantic gallantry with which she always loved to be addressed; and the Earl had, in vanity, in ambition, or in both, thrown in more and more of that delicious ingredient, until his importunity became the language of love itself.

"No, Dudley," said Elizabeth, yet it was with broken accents—"No, I must be the mother of my people. Other ties, that make the lowly maiden happy, are denied to her Sovereign—No, Leicester, urge it no more—Were I as others, free to seek my own happiness—then, indeed—but it cannot—cannot be.—Delay the chase—delay it for half-an-hour—and leave me, my lord."

"How, leave you, madam!" said Leicester,—"Has my madness offended you!"

"No, Leicester, not so!" answered the Queen hastily;

"but it is madness, and must not be repeated. Go—but go not far from hence—and meantime let no one intrude on my privacy."

While she spoke thus, Dudley bowed deeply, and retired with a slow and melancholy air. The Queen stood gazing after him, and murmured to herself—"Were it possible—were it *but* possible!—but no—no—Elizabeth must be the wife and mother of England alone."

As she spoke thus, and in order to avoid some one whose step she heard approaching, the Queen turned into the grotto in which her hapless, and yet but too successful rival, lay concealed.

It was then the Queen became aware, that a female figure was placed beside, or rather partly behind, an alabaster column, at the foot of which arose the pellucid fountain, which occupied the inmost recess of the twilight grotto. As she advanced, she became doubtful whether she beheld a statue or a form of flesh and blood. The unfortunate Amy, indeed, remained motionless, betwixt the desire which she had to make her condition known to one of her own sex, and her awe for the stately form which approached her, and which, though her eyes had never before beheld, her fears instantly suspected to be the personage she really was. Amy had arisen from her seat with the purpose of addressing the lady, who entered the grotto alone, and, as she at first thought, so opportunely. But when she recollected the alarm which Leicester had expressed at the Queen's knowing aught of their union, and became more and more satisfied that the person whom she now beheld was Elizabeth herself, she stood with one foot advanced and one withdrawn, her arms, head, and hands, perfectly motionless, and her cheek as pallid as the alabaster pedestal against which she leaned.

From her dress, and the casket which she instinctively held in her hand, Elizabeth naturally conjectured that the beautiful but mute figure which she beheld was a performer in one of the various theatrical pageants which had been placed in different situations to surprise her with their homage, and that the poor player, overcome with awe at her presence, had either forgot the part assigned her, or lacked courage to go through it. It was natural and courteous to give her some encouragement; and Elizabeth accordingly said, in a tone of condescending kindness,—"How now, fair Nymph of this lovely grotto—art thou spellbound and struck with dumbness by the wicked enchanter whom men term Fear?—We are his sworn enemy, maiden, and can reverse his charm. Speak, we command thee."

Instead of answering her by speech, the unfortunate

Countess dropped on her knee before the Queen, let her casket fall from her hand, and clasping her palms together, looked up in the Queen's face with such a mixed agony of fear and supplication, that Elizabeth was considerably affected.

"What may this mean?" she said; "this is a stronger passion than befits the occasion. Stand up, damsel—what wouldst thou have with us?"

"I request—I implore," stammered forth the unfortunate Countess,—"I beseech your gracious protection—against—against one Varney." She choked well-nigh as she uttered the fatal word, which was instantly caught up by the Queen.

"What, Varney,—Sir Richard Varney—the servant of Lord Leicester!—What, damsel, are you to him, or he to you?"

"I—I—was his prisoner—and he practised on my life—and I broke forth to—to——"

"To throw thyself on my protection, doubtless," said Elizabeth. "Thou shalt have it—that is if thou art worthy; for we will sift this matter to the uttermost.—Thou art," she said, bending on the Countess an eye which seemed designed to pierce her very inmost soul,—"Thou art Amy, daughter of Sir Hugh Robsart of Lidcote Hall?"

"Forgive me—forgive me—most gracious princess!" said Amy, dropping once more on her knee from which she had arisen.

"For what should I forgive thee, silly wench?" said Elizabeth; "for being the daughter of thine own father? Thou art brain-sick, surely. Well, I see I must wring the story from thee by inches—Thou didst deceive thine old and honoured father—thy look confesses it—cheated Master Tressilian—thy blush avouches it—and married this same Varney."

Amy sprung on her feet, and interrupted the Queen eagerly, with, "No, madam, no—as there is a God above us, I am not the sordid wretch you would make me! I am not the wife of that contemptible slave—of that most deliberate villain! I am not the wife of Varney! I would rather be the bride of Destruction!"

The Queen, overwhelmed in her turn by Amy's vehemence, stood silent for an instant, and then replied, "Why, God ha' mercy, woman!—I see thou canst talk fast enough when the theme likes thee. Nay, tell me, woman," she continued, for to the impulse of curiosity was now added that of an undefined jealousy that some deception had been practised on her,—"tell me, woman—for by God's day, I WILL know—whose wife or whose paramour art thou? Speak out, and be speedy—Thou wert better dally with a lioness than with Elizabeth."

Urged to this extremity, dragged as it were by irresistible force to the verge of a precipice, which she saw but could not avoid,—permitted not a moment's respite by the eager words and menacing gestures of the offended Queen, Amy at length uttered in despair, "The Earl of Leicester knows it all."

"The Earl of Leicester!" said Elizabeth, in utter astonishment—"The Earl of Leicester!" she repeated, with kindling anger,—"Woman, thou art set on to this—thou dost belie him—he takes no keep of such things as thou art. Thou art suborned to slander the noblest lord, and the truest-hearted gentleman, in England! But were he the right hand of our trust, or something yet dearer to us, thou shalt have thy hearing, and that in his presence. Come with me—come with me instantly!"

As Amy shrunk back with terror, which the incensed Queen interpreted as that of conscious guilt, Elizabeth rapidly advanced, seized on her arm, and hastened with swift and long steps out of the grotto, and along the principal alley of the Pleasance, dragging with her the terrified Countess, whom she still held by the arm, and whose utmost exertions could but just keep pace with those of the indignant Queen.

Leicester was at this moment the centre of a splendid group of lords and ladies assembled together under an arcade, or portico, which closed the alley. The company had drawn together in that place, to attend the commands of her Majesty when the hunting party should go forward, and their astonishment may be imagined, when, instead of seeing Elizabeth advance towards them with her usual measured dignity of motion, they beheld her, walking so rapidly, that she was in the midst of them ere they were aware; and then observed, with fear and surprise, that her features were flushed betwixt anger and agitation, that her hair was loosened by her haste of motion, and that her eyes sparkled as they were wont when the spirit of Henry VIII. mounted highest in his daughter. Nor were they less astonished at the appearance of the pale, attenuated, half dead, yet still lovely female, whom the Queen upheld by main strength with one hand, while with the other she waved aside the ladies and nobles who pressed towards her, under the idea that she was taken suddenly ill.—"Where is my Lord of Leicester?" she said, in a tone that thrilled with astonishment all the courtiers who stood around—"Stand forth, my Lord of Leicester!"

If, in the midst of the most serene day of summer, when all is light and laughing around, a thunderbolt were to fall from the clear blue vault of heaven, and rend the earth at the very feet of some careless traveller, he could not gaze upon the smouldering chasm, which so unexpectedly yawned before him, with half the astonishment and fear which Leicester felt at the sight that so suddenly presented itself. He had that instant been receiving, with a political affectation of disavowing and misunderstanding their meaning, the half-uttered, half-intimated congratulations of the courtiers, upon the favour of the Queen, carried apparently to its highest pitch during the interview of that morning; from which most of them seemed to augur, that he might soon arise from their equal in rank to become their master. And now, while the subdued yet proud smile with which he disclaimed those inferences was yet curling his cheek, the Queen shot into the circle, her passions excited to the uttermost; and, supporting with one hand, and apparently without an effort, the pale and sinking form of his almost expiring wife, and pointing with the finger of the other to her half-dead features, demanded in a voice that sounded to the ear of the astounded statesman like the last dread trumpet-call, that is to summon body and spirit to the judgment-seat, "Knowest thou this woman?"

As, at the blast of that last trumpet, the guilty shall call upon the mountains to cover them, Leicester's inward thoughts invoked the stately arch which he had built in his pride, to burst its strong conjunction, and overwhelm them in its ruins. But the cemented stones, architrave and battlement, stood fast; and it was the proud master-himself, who, as if some actual pressure had bent him to the earth, kneeled down before Elizabeth, and prostrated his brow to the marble flag-stones on which she stood.

"Leicester," said Elizabeth, in a voice which trembled with passion, "could I think thou hast practised on me—on me thy Sovereign—on me thy confiding, thy too partial mistress, the base and ungrateful deception which thy present confusion surmises—by all that is holy, false lord, that head of thine were in as great peril as ever was thy father's!"

Amy, who had by this time in some degree recovered herself, and who saw her husband, as she conceived, in the utmost danger from the rage of an offended Sovereign, instantly (and alas, how many women have done the same!) forgot her own wrongs, and her own danger, in her apprehensions for him, and throwing herself before the Queen, embraced her knees, while she exclaimed, "He is guiltless, madam, he is guiltless—no one can lay aught to the charge of the noble Leicester."

"Why, minion," answered the Queen, "didst not thou, thyself, say that the Earl of Leicester was privy to thy whole history?"

"Did I say so?" repeated the unhappy Amy, laying aside every consideration of consistency, and of self-interest;

"Oh, if I did, I foully belied him. May God so judge me, as I believe he was never privy to a thought that would harm me!"

"Woman!" said Elizabeth, "I will know who has moved thee to this; or my wrath—and the wrath of kings is a flaming fire—shall wither and consume thee like a weed in the furnace."

As the Queen uttered this threat, Leicester's better angel called his pride to his aid, and reproached him with the utter extremity of meanness which would overwhelm him for ever, if he stooped to take shelter under the generous interposition of his wife, and abandoned her, in return for her kindness, to the resentment of the Queen. He had already raised his head, with the dignity of a man of honour, to avow his marriage, and proclaim himself the protector of his Countess, when Varney, born, as it appeared, to be his master's evil genius, rushed into the presence, with every mark of disorder on his face and apparel.

"What means this saucy intrusion?" said Elizabeth.

Varney, with the air of a man overwhelmed with grief and confusion, prostrated himself before her feet, exclaiming, "Pardon, my Liege, pardon!—or at least let your justice avenge itself on me, where it is due; but spare my noble, my generous, my innocent patron and master!"

Amy, who was yet kneeling, started up as she saw the man whom she deemed most odious place himself so near her, and was about to fly towards Leicester, when, checked at once by the uncertainty and even timidity which his looks had reassumed as soon as the appearance of his confidant seemed to open a new scene, she hung back, and uttering a faint scream, besought of her Majesty to cause her to be imprisoned in the lowest dungeon of the Castle—to deal with her as the worst of criminals—"But spare," she exclaimed, "my sight and hearing, what will destroy the little judgment I have left—the sight of that unutterable and most shameless villain!"

"And why, sweetheart?" said the Queen, moved by a new impulse; "what hath he, this false knight, since such thou accountest him, done to thee?"

"Oh, worse than sorrow, madam, and worse than injury—he has sown dissension where most there should be peace. I shall go mad if I look longer on him."

"Beshrew me, but I think thou art distraught already," answered the Queen.—"My Lord Hunsdon, look to this poor distressed young woman, and let her be safely bestowed and in honest keeping, till we require her to be forthcoming."

"By Our Lady!" said Hunsdon, taking in his strong sinewy arms the fading and almost swooning form of Amy, "she is a lovely child; and though a rough nurse, your

Grace hath given her a kind one. She is safe with me as one of my own ladybirds of daughters."

So saying, he carried her off, unresistingly and almost unconsciously; his war-worn locks and long grey beard mingling with her light-brown tresses, as her head reclined on his strong square shoulder. The Queen followed him with her eye—she had already, with that self-command which forms so necessary a part of a Sovereign's accomplishments, suppressed every appearance of agitation, and seemed as if she desired to banish all traces of her burst of passion from the recollection of those who had witnessed it. "My Lord of Hunsdon says well," she observed, "he is indeed but a rough nurse for so tender a babe."

As she made this last observation, she smiled graciously and stole her eyes almost insensibly round to seek those of the Earl of Leicester, to whom she now began to think she had spoken with hasty harshness upon the unfounded suspicion of a moment.

The Queen's eye found the Earl in no mood to accept the implied offer of conciliation. His own looks had followed, with late and rueful repentance, the faded form which Hunsdon had just borne from the presence; they now reposed gloomily on the ground, but more—so at least it seemed to Elizabeth—with the expression of one who has received an unjust affront, than of him who is conscious of guilt. She turned her face angrily from him, and said to Varney, "Speak, Sir Richard, and explain these riddles—thou hast sense and the use of speech, at least, which elsewhere we look for in vain."

As she said this, she darted another resentful glance towards Leicester, while the wily Varney hastened to tell his own story.

"Your Majesty's piercing eye," he said, "has already detected the cruel malady of my beloved lady; which, unhappy that I am, I would not suffer to be expressed in the certificate of her physician, seeking to conceal what has now broken out with so much the more scandal."

"She is then distraught?" said the Queen—"indeed we doubted not of it—her whole demeanour bears it out. I found her moping in a corner of yonder grotto; and every word she spoke—which indeed I dragged from her as by the rack—she instantly recalled and forswore. But how came she hither? Why had you her not in safe-keeping?"

"My gracious Liege," said Varney, "the worthy gentleman under whose charge I left her, Master Anthony Foster, has come hither but now, as fast as man and horse can travel, to show me of her escape, which she managed with the art peculiar to many who are afflicted with this malady. He is at hand for examination."

"Let it be for another time," said the Queen. "But, Sir Richard, we envy you not your domestic felicity; your lady railed on you bitterly, and seemed ready to swoon at beholding you."

"It is the nature of persons in her disorder, so please your Grace," answered Varney, "to be ever most inveterate in their spleen against those whom, in their better moments, they hold nearest and dearest."

"We have heard so, indeed," said Elizabeth, "and give faith to the saying."

"May your Grace then be pleased," said Varney, "to command my unfortunate wife to be delivered into the custody of her friends?"

Leicester partly started; but, making a strong effort, he subdued his emotion, while Elizabeth answered sharply, "You are something too hasty, Master Varney; we will have first a report of the lady's health and state of mind from Masters, our own physician, and then determine what shall be thought just. You shall have licence, however, to see her, that if there be any matrimonial quarrel betwixt you—such things we have heard do occur, even betwixt a loving couple—you may make it up, without farther scandal to our court, or trouble to ourselves."

Varney bowed low, and made no other answer.

Elizabeth again looked towards Leicester, and said, with a degree of condescension which could only arise out of the most heartfelt interest, "Discord, as the Italian poet says, will find her way into peaceful convents, as well as into the privacy of families; and we fear our own guards and ushers will hardly exclude her from courts. My Lord of Leicester, you are offended with us, and we have right to be offended with you. We will take the lion's part upon us, and be the first to forgive."

Leicester smoothed his brow, as if by an effort, but the trouble was too deep-seated that its placidity should at once return. He said, however, that which fitted the occasion, "that he could not have the happiness of forgiving, because she who commanded him to do so, could commit no injury towards him."

Elizabeth seemed content with this reply, and intimated her pleasure that the sports of the morning should proceed. The bugles sounded—the hounds bayed—the horses pranced—but the courtiers and ladies sought the amusements to which they were summoned with hearts very different from those which had leaped to the morning's *réveil*. There was doubt, and fear, and expectation, on every brow, and surmise and intrigue in every whisper.

Blount took an opportunity to whisper into Raleigh's ear, "This storm came like a levanter in the Mediterranean."

"*Varium et mutabile*," answered Raleigh, in a similar tone.

"Nay, I know nought of your Latin," said Blount; "but I thank God Tressilian took not the sea during that hurricane. He could scarce have missed shipwreck, knowing as he does so little how to trim his sails to a court gale."

"Thou wouldst have instructed him?" said Raleigh.

"Why, I have profited by my time as well as thou, Sir Walter," replied honest Blount. "I am knight as well as thou, and of the earlier creation."

"Now, God farther thy wit," said Raleigh; "but for Tressilian, I would I knew what were the matter with him. He told me this morning he would not leave his chamber for the space of twelve hours or thereby, being bound by a promise. This lady's madness, when he shall learn it, will not, I fear, cure his infirmity. The moon is at the fullest, and men's brains are working like yeast. But hark! they sound to mount. Let us to horse, Blount; we young knights must deserve our spurs."

XXIV

IT was not till after a long and successful morning's sport, and a prolonged repast which followed the return of the Queen to the Castle, that Leicester at length found himself alone with Varney, from whom he now learned the whole particulars of the Countess's escape, as they had been brought to Kenilworth by Foster, who, in his terror for the consequences, had himself posted thither with the tidings. As Varney, in his narrative, took especial care to be silent concerning those practices on the Countess's health which had driven her to so desperate a resolution, Leicester, who could only suppose that she had adopted it out of jealous impatience, to attain the avowed state and appearance belonging to her rank, was not a little offended at the levity with which his wife had broken his strict commands, and exposed him to the resentment of Elizabeth.

"I have given," he said, "to this daughter of an obscure Devonshire gentleman, the proudest name in England. I have made her sharer of my bed and of my fortunes. I ask but of her a little patience, ere she launches forth upon the full current of her grandeur, and the infatuated woman will rather hazard her own shipwreck and mine, will rather involve me in a thousand whirlpools, shoals, and quicksands, and compel me to a thousand devices which shame me in mine own eyes, than tarry for a little space longer in the obscurity to which she was born. So lovely, so delicate, so fond, so faithful—yet to lack in so grave a matter the prudence which one might hope from the veriest fool—it puts me beyond my patience."

"We may post it over yet well enough," said Varney, "if my lady will be but ruled, and take on her the character which the time commands. So then, my lord, if this union with the lady could be concealed, you stand with Elizabeth as you did?"

Leicester sighed, and was silent for a moment ere he replied.

"Varney, I think thou art true to me, and I will tell thee all. I do *not* stand where I did. I have spoken to Elizabeth under what mad impulse I know not—on a theme which cannot be abandoned without touching every female feeling to the quick, and which yet I dare not and cannot prosecute. She can never, never forgive me, for having caused and witnessed those yeildings to human passion."

"We must do something, my lord," said Varney, "and that speedily. I will show her such reasons for yielding to the pressure of the times, that I doubt not to bring back her consent to whatever measures these exigencies may require."

"No, Varney," said Leicester; "I have thought upon what is to be done, and I will myself speak with Amy."

It was now Varney's turn to feel, upon his own account, the terrors which he affected to participate solely on account of his patron. "Your lordship will not yourself speak with the lady?"

"It is my fixed purpose," said Leicester; "fetch me one of the livery cloaks; I will pass the sentinel as thy servant. Thou art to have free access to her."

"But, my lord——"

"I will have no *buts*," replied Leicester; "it shall be even thus, and not otherwise. Hunsdon sleeps, I think, in Saint-Lowe's Tower. We can go thither from these apartments by the private passage, without risk of meeting any one. Or what if I do meet Hunsdon? he is more my friend than enemy, and thick-witted enough to adopt any belief that is thrust on him. Fetch me the cloak instantly."

Varney had no alternative save obedience. In a few minutes Leicester was muffled in the mantle, pulled his bonnet over his brows, and followed Varney along the secret passage of the Castle which communicated with Hunsdon's apartments in which there was scarce a chance of meeting any inquisitive person, and hardly light enough for any such to have satisfied their curiosity. They emerged at a door where Lord Hunsdon had, with military precaution, placed a sentinel, one of his own northern retainers as it fortuned, who readily admitted Sir Richard Varney and his attendant, saying only, in his northern dialect, "I would, man, thou couldst make the mad lady be still yonder; for her moans do sae dirl through my head, that I would rather keep watch on a snow-drift in the wastes of Catlowdie."

They hastily entered and shut the door behind them.

"Now, good devil, if there be one," said Varney, within himself, "for once help a votary at a dead pinch, for my boat is among the breakers!"

The Countess Amy, with her hair and her garments dishevelled, was seated upon a sort of couch, in an attitude of the deepest affliction, out of which she was startled by the opening of the door. She turned hastily round, and fixing her eye on Varney, exclaimed, "Wretch! art thou come to frame some new plan of villany?"

Leicester cut short her reproaches by stepping forward, and dropping his cloak, while he said, in a voice rather of authority, than of affection, "It is with me, madam, you have to commune, not with Sir Richard Varney."

The change effected on the Countess's look and manner was like magic. "Dudley!" she exclaimed, "Dudley! and art thou come at last?" And with the speed of lightning she flew to her husband, clung around his neck, and, unheeding the presence of Varney, overwhelmed him with caresses, while she bathed his face in a flood of tears; muttering, at the same time, but in broken and disjointed monosyllables, the fondest expressions which love teaches his votaries.

Leicester, as it seemed to him, had reason to be angry with his lady for transgressing his commands, and thus placing him in the perilous situation in which he had that morning stood. But what displeasure could keep its ground before these testimonies of affection from a being so lovely, that even the negligence of dress, and the withering effects of fear, grief, and fatigue, which would have impaired the beauty of others, rendered hers but the more interesting? He received and repaid her caresses with fondness, mingled with melancholy, the last of which she seemed scarcely to observe, until the first transport of her own joy was over; when, looking anxiously in his face, she asked if he was ill.

"Not in my body, Amy," was his answer.

"Then I will be well too.—O Dudley! I have been ill!—very ill, since we last met!—for I call not this morning's horrible vision a meeting. I have been in sickness, in grief, and in danger—But thou art come, and all is joy, and health, and safety!"

"Alas! Amy," said Leicester, "thou hast undone me!"

"I my lord?" said Amy, her cheek at once losing its transient flush of joy,—"how could I injure that which I love better than myself?"

"I would not upbraid you, Amy," replied the Earl; "but are you not here contrary to my express commands—and does not your presence here endanger both yourself and me?"

"Does it, does it indeed?" she exclaimed eagerly; "then why am I here a moment longer? Oh, if you knew by what fears I was urged to quit Cumnor Place!—But I will say nothing of myself—only that if it might be otherwise, I would not willingly return *thither*;—yet if it concern your safety——"

"We will think, Amy, of some other retreat," said Leicester; "and you shall go to one of my Northern Castles, under the personage—it will be but needful, I trust, for a very few days—of Varney's wife."

"How, my Lord of Leicester?" said the lady, disengaging herself from his embraces; "is it to your wife you give the dishonourable counsel to acknowledge herself the bride of another—and of all men the bride of that Varney?"

"Madam, I speak it in earnest—Varney is my true and faithful servant, trusted in my deepest secrets. I had better lose my right hand than his service at this moment. You have no cause to scorn him as you do."

There was a dead pause. Leicester stood displeased, yet undetermined, and too conscious of the weakness of his cause; while Varney, with a deep and hypocritical affectation of sorrow, mingled with humility, bent his eyes on the ground.

It was then that the Countess Amy displayed, in the midst of distress and difficulty, the natural energy of character, which would have rendered her, had fate allowed, a distinguished ornament of the rank which she held. She walked up to Leicester with a composed step, a dignified air, and looks in which strong affection essayed in vain to shake the firmness of conscious truth and rectitude of principle. "You have spoke your mind, my lord," she said, "in these difficulties, with which, unhappily, I have found myself unable to comply. Extricate yourself at once, my lord, from the tyranny of these disgraceful trammels. Be like a true English gentleman, knight, and earl, who holds that truth is the foundation of honour, and that honour is dear to him as the breath of his nostrils. Take your ill-fated wife by the hand, lead her to the footstool of Elizabeth's throne.—Say, that in a moment of infatuation, moved by supposed beauty, of which none perhaps can now trace even the remains, I gave my hand to this Amy Robsart.—You will then have done justice to me, my lord, and to your own honour; and should law or power require you to part from me, I will oppose no objection—since I may then with honour hide a grieved and broken heart in those shades from which your love withdrew me. Then—have but a little patience, and Amy's life will not long darken your brighter prospects."

There was so much of dignity, so much of tenderness, in the Countess's remonstrance, that it moved all that was noble and generous in the soul of her husband. The scales seemed to fall from his eyes, and the duplicity and tergiversation of which he had been guilty, stung him at once with remorse and shame.

"I am not worthy of you, Amy," he said, "that could weigh aught which ambition has to give against such a heart as thine. I have a bitter penance to perform, in disentangling, before sneering foes and astounded friends, all the meshes of my own deceitful policy.—Varney, we must hence—Farewell, Amy, whom I am to vindicate as mine own, at an expense and risk of which thou alone couldst be worthy. You shall soon hear farther from me."

He embraced her fervently, muffled himself as before, and accompanied Varney from the apartment. The latter, as he left the room, bowed low, and, as he raised his body, regarded Amy with a peculiar expression, as if he desired to know how far his own pardon was included in the reconciliation which had taken place betwixt her and her lord. The Countess looked upon him with a fixed eye, but seemed no more conscious of his presence than if there had been nothing but vacant air on the spot where he stood.

"She has brought me to the crisis," he muttered.—"She or I are lost. There was something—I wot not if it was fear or pity—that prompted me to avoid this fatal crisis. It is now decided—She or I must *perish*."

While he thus spoke, he observed, with surprise, that a boy, repulsed by the sentinel, made up to Leicester, and spoke with him. Varney was one of those politicians, whom not the slightest appearances escape without inquiry. He asked the sentinel what the lad wanted with him, and received for answer, that the boy had wished him to transmit a parcel to the mad lady, but that he cared not to take charge of it, such communication being beyond his commission. His curiosity satisfied in that particular, he approached his patron, and heard him say—"Well, boy, the packet shall be delivered."

"Thanks, good Master Serving-man," said the boy, and was out of sight in an instant.

Leicester and Varney returned with hasty steps to the Earl's private apartment, by the same passage which had conducted them to Saintlowe's Tower.

XXV

THEY were no sooner in the Earl's cabinet, than, taking his tablets from his pocket, he began to write, speaking partly to Varney, and partly to himself:—"There are many of them close bounden to me, and especially those in good estate and high office; many who, if they look back towards my benefits, or forward towards the perils which may befall themselves, will not, I think, be disposed to see me stagger unsupported. Let me see—Knollis is sure, and through his means Guernsey and Jersey—Horsey commands in the Isle of Wight—My brother-in-law, Huntingdon, and Pembroke, have authority in Wales—Through Bedford I lead the Puritans, with their interest, so powerful in all the boroughs—My brother of Warwick is equal, well-nigh, to myself, in wealth, followers, and dependencies—Sir Owen Hopton is at my devotion; he commands the Tower of London, and the national treasure deposited there—My father and grandfather needed never to have stooped their heads to the block, had they thus forecast their enterprises.—Why look you so sad, Varney? I tell thee, a tree so deep-rooted is not easily to be torn up by the tempest!"

"Alas! my lord," said Varney, with well-acted passion, and then resumed the same look of despondency which Leicester had before noted.

"Alas!" repeated Leicester, "and wherefore alas, Sir Richard? Doth your new spirit of chivalry supply no more vigorous ejaculation, when a noble struggle is impeding? Or, if *alas* means thou wilt flinch from the conflict, thou mayest leave the Castle, or go join mine enemies, whichever thou thinkest best."

"Not so, my lord," answered his confidant; "Varney will be found fighting or dying by your side. Forgive me, if in love to you, I see more fully than your noble heart permits you to do, the inextricable difficulties with which you are surrounded. You are strong, my lord, and powerful; yet, let me say it without offence, you are so only by the reflected light of the Queen's favour. While you are Elizabeth's favourite, you are all, save in name, like an actual sovereign. But let her call back the honours she has bestowed, and the Prophet's gourd did not wither more suddenly. Declare against the Queen, and I do not say that in the wide nation, or in this province alone, you would find yourself instantly deserted and outnumbered; but I will say, that even in this very Castle, and in the midst of your vassals, kinsmen, and dependants, you would be a captive, nay, a sentenced captive, should she please to say the word. Think upon Norfolk, my lord—upon the powerful Northumberland—the splendid Westmoreland; think on all who have made head against this sage Princess. They are dead, captive, or fugitive. This is not like other thrones, which can be overturned by a combination of powerful nobles; the broad foundations which support it are in the extended love and affections of the people. You might share it with Elizabeth if you would; but neither yours nor any other power, foreign or domestic, will avail to overthrow, or even to shake it."

He paused, and Leicester threw his tablets from him with an air of reckless despite. "It may be as thou sayest," he said; "and, in sooth, I care not whether truth or cowardice dictate thy forebodings. But it shall not be said I fell without a struggle. Give orders, that those of my retainers who served under me in Ireland be gradually drawn into the main Keep, and let our gentlemen and friends stand on their guard, and go armed, as if they expected an onset from the followers of Sussex. Possess the townspeople with some apprehension; let them take arms, and be ready, at a given signal, to overpower the Pensioners and Yeomen of the Guard."

"Let me remind you, my lord," said Varney, with the same appearance of deep and melancholy interest, "that you have given me orders to prepare for disarming the Queen's guard. It is an act of high treason, but you shall nevertheless be obeyed."

"I care not," said Leicester, desperately; "I care not. Shame is behind me, Ruin before me; I must on."

Here there was another pause, which Varney at length broke with the following words: "It is come to the point I have long dreaded. I must either witness, like an ungrateful beast, the downfall of the best and kindest of masters, or I must speak what I would have buried in the deepest oblivion, or told by any other mouth than mine."

"What is that thou sayest, or wouldst say?" replied the Earl; "we have no time to waste on words, when the times call us to action."

"My speech is soon made, my lord—would to God it were as soon answered! Your marriage is the sole cause of the threatened breach with your sovereign, my lord, is it not?"

"Thou knowest it is!" replied Leicester. "What needs so fruitless a question?"

"Pardon me, my lord," said Varney; "the use lies here. Men will wager their lands and lives in defence of a rich diamond, my lord; but were it not first prudent to look if there is no flaw in it?"

"What means this?" said Leicester, with eyes sternly fixed on his dependant; "of whom dost thou dare to speak?"

"It is—of the Countess Amy, my lord, of whom I am unhappily bound to speak; and of whom I *will* speak, were your lordship to kill me for my zeal."

"Thou mayest happen to deserve it at my hand," said the Earl; "but speak on, I will hear thee."

"Nay, then, my lord, I will be bold. I speak for my own life as well as for your lordship's. I like not this lady's tampering and trickstering with this same Edmund Tressilian. You know him, my lord. You know he had formerly an interest in her, which it cost your lordship some pains to supersede. You know the eagerness with which he has pressed on the suit against me in behalf of this lady, the open object of which is to drive your lordship to an avowal of what I must ever call your most unhappy marriage, the point to which my lady also is willing, at any risk, to urge you."

Leicester smiled constrainedly. "Thou meanest well, good Sir Richard, and wouldst, I think, sacrifice thine own honour, as well as that of any other person, to save me from what thou think'st a step so terrible. But, remember"—he spoke these words with the most stern decision—"you speak of the Countess of Leicester."

"I do, my lord," said Varney; "but it is for the welfare of the Earl of Leicester. My tale is but begun. I do most strongly believe that this Tressilian has, from the beginning of his moving in her cause, been in connivance with her ladyship the Countess."

"Thou speak'st wild madness, Varney, with the sober face of a preacher. Where or how could they communicate together?"

"My lord," said Varney, "unfortunately I can show that but too well. It was just before the supplication was presented to the Queen, in Tressilian's name, that I met him, to my utter astonishment, at the postern-gate which leads from the demesne at Cumnor Place."

"Thou met'st him, villain! and why didst thou not strike him dead?" exclaimed Leicester.

"I drew on him, my lord, and he on me; and had not my foot slipped, he would not, perhaps, have been again a stumbling-block in your lordship's path."

Leicester seemed struck dumb with surprise. At length he answered, "What other evidence hast thou of this, Varney, save thine own assertion?—for, as I will punish deeply, I will examine coolly and warily. Sacred Heaven! but no—I will examine coldly and warily—coldly and warily." He repeated these words more than once to himself, as if in the very sound there was a sedative quality; and again compressing his lips, as if he feared some violent expression might escape from them, he asked again, "What further proof?"

"Enough, my lord," said Varney, "and to spare. I would it rested with me alone, for with me it might have been silenced for ever. But my servant, Michael Lambourne, witnessed the whole, and was, indeed, the means of first introducing Tressilian into Cumnor Place; and therefore I took him into my service, and retained him in it, though something of a debauched fellow, that I might have his tongue always under my own command." He then acquainted Lord Leicester how easy it was to prove the circumstance of their interview true, by evidence of Anthony Foster, with the corroborative testimonies of the various persons at Cumnor, who had heard the wager laid, and had seen Lambourne and Tressilian set off together. In the whole narrative Varney hazarded nothing fabulous, excepting that, not indeed by direct assertion, but by inference, he led his patron to suppose that the interview betwixt Amy and Tressilian at Cumnor Place had been longer than the few minutes to which it was in reality limited.

"And wherefore was I not told of all this?" said Leicester, sternly. "Why did all of ye—and in particular thou, Varney—keep back from me such material information?"

"Because, my lord," replied Varney, "the Countess pretended to Foster and to me, that Tressilian had intruded himself upon her; and I concluded their interview had been in all honour, and that she would at her own time tell it to your lordship. Your lordship knows with what unwilling ears we listen to evil surmises against those whom we love; and I thank Heaven, I am no make-bate or informer, to be the first to sow them."

"You are but too ready to receive them, however, Sir Richard," replied his patron. "How knowest thou that this interview was not in all honour, as thou hast said? Methinks the wife of the Earl of Leicester might speak for a short time with such a person as Tressilian, without injury to me or suspicion to herself."

"Questionless, my lord," answered Varney; "had I thought otherwise, I had been no keeper of the secret. But here lies the rub—Tressilian leaves not the place without establishing a correspondence with a poor man, the landlord of an inn in Cumnor, for the purpose of carrying off the lady. He sent down an emissary of his, whom I trust soon to have in right sure keeping under Mervyn's Tower. Killigrew and

Lambsbey are scouring the country in quest of him. The host is rewarded with a ring for keeping counsel—your lordship may have noted it on Tressilian's hand—here it is. This fellow, this agent, makes his way to the Place as a pedlar, holds conferences with the lady, and they make their escape together by night—rob a poor fellow of a horse by the way, such was their guilty haste; and at length reach this castle, where the Countess of Leicester finds refuge—I dare not say in what place."

"Speak, I command thee," said Leicester; "speak while I retain sense enough to hear thee."

"Since it must be so," answered Varney, "the lady resorted immediately to the apartment of Tressilian, where she remained many hours, partly in company with him, and partly alone. I told you Tressilian had a paramour in his chamber—I little dreamed that paramour was——"

"Amy, thou wouldst say," answered Leicester; "but it is false, false as the smoke of hell! Ambitious she may be—fickle and impatient—'tis a woman's fault; but false to me!—never, never.—The proof—the proof of this!" he exclaimed, hastily.

"Carrol, the Deputy Marshal, ushered her thither by her own desire, on yesterday afternoon—Lambourne and the Warder both found her there at an early hour this morning."

"Was Tressilian there with her?" said Leicester, in the same hurried tone.

"No, my lord. You may remember," answered Varney, "that he was that night placed with Sir Nicholas Blount, under a species of arrest."

"Did Carrol, or the other fellows, know who she was?" demanded Leicester.

"No, my lord," replied Varney; "Carrol and the Warder had never seen the Countess, and Lambourne knew her not in her disguise; but, in seeking to prevent her leaving the cell, he obtained possession of one of her gloves, which, I think, your lordship may know."

He gave the glove which had the Bear and Ragged Staff, the Earl's impress, embroidered upon it in seed pearls.

"I do, I do recognise it," said Leicester. "They were my own gift. The fellow of it was on the arm which she threw this very day around my neck!"—He spoke this with violent agitation.

"Your lordship," said Varney, "might yet farther inquire of the lady herself, respecting the truth of these passages."

"It needs not—it needs not," said the tortured Earl; "it is written in characters of burning light, as if they were branded on my very eyeballs! I see her infamy—I can see nought else; and—gracious Heaven!—for this vile woman was I about to commit to danger the lives of so many noble friends—shake the foundation of a lawful throne—carry the sword and torch through the bosom of a peaceful land—wrong the kind mistress who made me what I am—and would, but for that hell-framed marriage, have made me all that man can be! All this I was ready to do for a woman, who trinkets and traffics with my worst foes!—And thou, villain, why didst thou not speak sooner?"

"My lord," said Varney, "a tear from my lady would have blotted out all I could have said. Besides, I had not these proofs until this very morning, when Anthony Foster's sudden arrival, with the examinations and declarations, which he had extorted from the innkeeper Gosling, and others, explained the manner of her flight from Cumnor Place, and my own researches discovered the steps which she had taken here."

"Now, may God be praised for the light he has given! so full, so satisfactory, that there breathes not a man in England who shall call my proceeding rash, or my revenge unjust.—And yet Varney, so young, so fair, so fawning, and so false! Hence, then, her hatred to thee, my trusty, my well-beloved servant, because you withstood her plots, and endangered her paramour's life!"

"I never gave her any other cause of dislike, my lord," replied Varney; "but she knew that my counsels went directly to diminish her influence with your lordship; and that I was, and have been, ever ready to peril my life against your enemies."

"It is too, too apparent," replied Leicester; "yet, with what an air of magnanimity she exhorted me to commit my head to the Queen's mercy, rather than wear the veil of falsehood a moment longer! Methinks the angel of truth himself can have no such tones of high-souled impulse. Can it be so, Varney?—Can falsehood use thus boldly the language of truth?—Can infamy thus assume the guise of purity?—Varney, thou hast been my servant from a child—I have raised thee high—can raise thee higher. Think, think for me! Thy brain was ever shrewd and piercing—May she not be innocent? Prove her so, and all I have yet done for thee shall be as nothing—nothing—in comparison of thy recompense?"

The agony with which his master spoke, had some effect even on the hardened Varney, who, in the midst of his own wicked and ambitious designs, really loved his patron as well as such a wretch was capable of loving anything; but he comforted himself, and subdued his self-reproaches, with the reflection, that if he inflicted upon the Earl some immediate and transitory pain, it was in order to pave his way to the throne, which, were this marriage dissolved by death or otherwise, he deemed Elizabeth would willingly share with his benefactor. He therefore persevered in his diabolical policy; and, after a moment's consideration, answered the anxious queries of the Earl with a melancholy look, as if he had in vain sought some exculpation for the Countess; then suddenly raising his head, he said with an expression of hope, which instantly communicated itself to the countenance of his patron—"Yet wherefore, if guilty, should she have perilled herself by coming hither? Why not rather have fled to her father's or elsewhere?—though that, indeed, might have interfered with her desire to be acknowledged as Countess of Leicester."

"True, true, true!" exclaimed Leicester, his transient gleam of hope giving way to the utmost bitterness of feeling and expression; "thou art not fit to fathom a woman's depth of wit, Varney. I see it all. She would not quit the estate and title of the wittol who had wedded her. Ay, and if in my madness I had started into rebellion, or if the angry Queen had taken my head, as she this morning threatened, the wealthy dower which law would have assigned to the Countess Dowager of Leicester, had been no bad windfall to the beggarly Tressilian. Well might she goad me on to danger, which could not end otherwise than profitably to her.—Speak not for her, Varney! I will have her blood!"

"My lord," replied Varney, "the wildness of your distress breaks forth in the wildness of your language."

"I say, speak not for her!" replied Leicester; "she has dishonoured me—she would have murdered me—all ties are burst between us. She shall die the death of a traitress and adulteress, well merited both by the laws of God and man! And—what is this casket," he said, "which was even now thrust into my hand by a boy, with the desire I would convey it to Tressilian, as he could not give it to the Countess? By Heaven! the words surprised me as he spoke them, though other matters chased them from my brain; but now they return with double force.—It is her casket of jewels!—Force it open, Varney; force the hinges open with thy poniard."

"She refused the aid of my dagger once," thought Varney, as he unsheathed the weapon to cut the string which bound a letter, "but now it shall work a mightier ministry in her fortunes."

With this reflection, by using the three-cornered stiletto-blade as a wedge, he forced open the slender silver hinges of the casket. The Earl no sooner saw them give way, than he snatched the casket from Sir Richard's hand, wrenched off the cover, and tearing out the splendid contents, flung them on the floor in a transport of rage, while he eagerly searched for some letter or billet, which should make the fancied guilt of his innocent Countess yet more apparent. Then stamping furiously on the gems, he exclaimed, "Thus I annihilate the miserable toys for which thou hast sold thyself, body and soul, consigned thyself to an early and timeless death, and me to misery and remorse for ever!—Tell me not of forgiveness, Varney—She is doomed!"

So saying, he left the room, and rushed into an adjacent closet, the door of which he locked and bolted.

Varney looked after him, while something of a more human feeling seemed to contend with his habitual sneer. "I am sorry for his weakness," he said, "but love has made him a child. He throws down and treads on these costly toys—with the same vehemence would he dash to pieces this frailest toy of all, of which he used to rave so fondly. But that taste also will be forgotten when its object is no more. Well, he has no eye to value things as they deserve, and that nature has given to Varney. When Leicester shall be a sovereign, he will think as little of the gales of passion, through which he gained that royal port, as ever did sailor in harbour of the perils of a voyage. But these tell-tale articles must not remain here—they are rather too rich vails for the drudges who dress the chamber."

While Varney was employed in gathering together and putting them into a secret drawer of a cabinet that chanced to be open, he saw the door of Leicester's closet open, the tapestry pushed aside, and the Earl's face thrust out, but with eyes so dead, and lips and cheeks so bloodless and pale, that he started at the sudden change. No sooner did his eyes encounter the Earl's than the latter withdrew his head, and shut the door of the closet. This manœuvre Leicester repeated twice, without speaking a word, so that Varney began to doubt whether his brain was not actually affected by his mental agony. The third time, however, he beckoned, and Varney obeyed the signal. When he entered, he soon found his patron's perturbation was not caused by insanity, but by the fellness of purpose which he entertained, contending with various contrary passions. They passed a full hour in close consultation; after which the Earl of Leicester, with an incredible exertion, dressed himself, and went to attend his royal guest.

XXVI

It was afterwards remembered, that during the banquets and revels which occupied the remainder of this eventful day, the bearing of Leicester and Varney was totally different from their usual demeanour. Sir Richard Varney had been held rather a man of counsel and of action, than a votary of pleasure. Business, whether civil or military, seemed always to be his proper sphere; and while in festivals and revels, although he well understood how to trick them up and present them, his own part was that of a mere spectator; or if he exercised his wit, it was in a rough, caustic, and severe manner, rather as if he scoffed at the exhibition and the guests, than shared the common pleasure.

But upon the present day his character seemed changed. He mixed among the younger courtiers and ladies, and appeared for the moment to be actuated by a spirit of light-hearted gaiety, which rendered him a match for the liveliest. Those who had looked upon him as a man given up to graver and more ambitious pursuits, a bitter sneerer and passer of sarcasms at the expense of those, who, taking life as they find it, were disposed to snatch at each pastime it presents, now perceived with astonishment that his wit could carry as smooth an edge as their own, his laugh be as lively, and his brow as unclouded. By what art of damnable hypocrisy he could draw this veil of gaiety over the black thoughts of one of the worst of human bosoms, must remain unintelligible to all but his compeers, if any such ever existed; but he was a man of extraordinary powers, and those powers were unhappily dedicated in all their energy to the very worst of purposes.

It was entirely different with Leicester. However habituated his mind usually was to play the part of a good courtier, and appear gay, assiduous, and free from all care but that of enhancing the pleasure of the moment, while his bosom internally throbbed with the pangs of unsatisfied ambition, jealousy, or resentment, his heart had now a yet more dreadful guest, whose workings could not be overshadowed or suppressed; and you might read in his vacant eye and troubled brow, that his thoughts were far absent from the scenes in which he was compelling himself to play a part. He looked, moved, and spoke, as if by a succession of continued efforts; and it seemed as if his will had in some degree lost the promptitude of command over the acute mind and goodly form of which it was the regent. His actions and gestures, instead of appearing the consequence of simple volition, seemed, like those of an automaton, to wait the revolution of some internal machinery ere they could be performed; and his words fell from him piecemeal, interrupted, as if he had first to think what he was to say, then how it was to be said, and as if, after all, it was only by an effort of continued attention that he completed a sentence without forgetting both the one and the other.

The singular effects which these distractions of mind produced upon the behaviour and conversation of the most accomplished courtier of England, as they were visible to the lowest and dullest menial who approached his person, could not escape the notice of the most intelligent princess of the age. Nor is there the least doubt, that the alternate negligence and irregularity of his manner, would have called down Elizabeth's severe displeasure on the Earl of Leicester, had it not occurred to her to account for it, by supposing that the apprehension of that displeasure which she had expressed towards him with such vivacity that very morning, was dwelling upon the spirits of her favourite, and, spite of his efforts to the contrary, distracted the usual graceful tenor of his mien, and the charms of his conversation. When this idea, so flattering to female vanity, had once obtained possession of her mind, it proved a full and satisfactory apology for the numerous errors and mistakes of the Earl of Leicester; and the watchful circle around observed with astonishment, that, instead of resenting his repeated negligence, and want of even ordinary attention (although these were points on which she was usually extremely punctilious), the Queen sought, on the contrary, to afford him time and means to recollect himself, and deigned to assist him in doing so, with an indulgence which seemed altogether inconsistent with her usual character. It was clear, however, that this could not last much longer, and that Elizabeth must finally put another and more severe construction on Leicester's uncourteous conduct, when the Earl was summoned by Varney to speak with him in a different apartment.

After having had the message twice delivered to him, he rose, and was about to withdraw, as it were by instinct—then stopped, and turning round, entreated permission of the Queen to absent himself for a brief space upon matters of pressing importance.

"Go, my lord," said the Queen; "we are aware our presence must occasion sudden and unexpected occurrences, which require to be provided for on the instant. Yet, my lord, as you would have us believe ourself your welcome and honoured guest, we entreat you to think less of our good cheer, and favour us with more of your good countenance, than we have this day enjoyed; for whether prince or peasant be the guest, the welcome of the host will always be the better part of the entertainment. Go, my lord; and we trust to see you return with an unwrinkled brow, and these free thoughts which you are wont to have at the disposal of your friends."

Leicester only bowed low in answer to this rebuke, and retired. At the door of the apartment he was met by Varney, who eagerly drew him apart, and whispered in his ear, "All is well!"

"Has Masters seen her?" said the Earl.

"He has, my lord; and as she would neither answer his queries, nor allege any reason for her refusal, he will give full testimony that she labours under a mental disorder, and may be best committed to the charge of her friends. The opportunity is therefore free, to remove her as we proposed."

"But Tressilian?" said Leicester.

"He will not know of her departure for some time," replied Varney; "it shall take place this very evening, and to-morrow he shall be cared for."

"No, by my soul," answered Leicester; "I will take vengeance on him with mine own hand!"

"You, my lord, and on so inconsiderable a man as Tressilian! No, my lord, he hath long wished to visit foreign parts. Trust him to me—I will take care he returns not hither to tell tales."

"Not so, by Heaven, Varney!" exclaimed Leicester.—"Inconsiderable do you call an enemy, that hath had power to wound me so deeply, that my whole after life must be one scene of remorse and misery?—No; rather than forego the right of doing myself justice with my hand on that accursed villain, I will unfold the whole truth at Elizabeth's footstool, and let her vengeance descend at once on them and on myself."

Varney saw with great alarm that his lord was wrought up to such a pitch of agitation, that if he gave not way to him, he was perfectly capable of adopting the desperate resolution which he had announced, and which was instant ruin to all the schemes of ambition which Varney had formed for his patron and for himself. But the Earl's rage seemed at once uncontrollable and deeply concentrated; and while he spoke, his eyes shot fire, his voice trembled with excess of passion, and the light foam stood on his lip.

His confidant made a bold and successful effort to obtain the mastery of him even in this hour of emotion.—"Be thyself, my noble master," said Varney, touching the Earl's hand with his lips, after having respectfully grasped it in his own; "be yourself, superior to those storms of passion which wreck inferior minds. Are you the first who has been cozened in love? The first whom a vain and licentious woman has cheated into an affection, which she has afterwards scorned and misused? And will you suffer yourself to be driven frantic, because you have not been wiser than the wisest men whom the world has seen? Let her be as if she had not been—let her pass from your memory, as unworthy of ever having held a place there. Let your strong resolve of this morning, which I have both courage, zeal, and means enough to execute, be like the fiat of a superior being, a passionless act of justice. She hath deserved death—let her die!"

While he was speaking, the Earl held his hand fast, compressed his lips hard, and frowned, as if he laboured to catch from Varney a portion of the cold, ruthless, and dispassionate firmness which he recommended. When he was silent, the Earl still continued to grasp his hand, until, with an effort at calm decision, he was able to articulate, "Be it so—she dies!—Hast thou aught else to say?"

"I must crave your signet-ring," said Varney, gravely, "in token to those of your servants whom I must employ, that I possess your full authority in commanding their aid."

Leicester drew off the signet-ring, which he commonly used, and gave it to Varney with a haggard and stern expression of countenance, adding only, in a low half-whispered tone, but with terrific emphasis, the words, "What thou dost, do quickly."

Some anxiety and wonder took place, meanwhile, in the Presence hall, at the prolonged absence of the noble Lord of the Castle, and great was the delight of his friends, when they saw him enter as a man, from whose bosom, to all human seeming, a weight of care had been just removed. The music then sounded, and Leicester, stationed for the moment near the bottom of the hall, and consequently engaged in some degree in the crowd, felt himself pulled by the cloak, while a voice whispered in his ear, "My lord, I do desire some instant conference with you." The words were simple in themselves, but Lord Leicester was in that alarmed and feverish state of mind when the most ordinary occurrences seem fraught with alarming import; and he turned hastily round to survey the person by whom they had been spoken. There was nothing remarkable in the speaker's appearance, which consisted of a black silk doublet and short mantle, with a black vizard on his face; for it appeared he had been among the crowd of masks who had thronged into the hall, though he did not wear any of the extravagant disguises by which most of them were distinguished.

"Who are you, or what do you want with me?" said Leicester, not without betraying by his accents, the hurried state of his spirits.

"No evil, my lord," answered the mask, "but much good and honour, if you will rightly understand my purpose. But I must speak with you more privately."

"I can speak with no nameless stranger," answered Leicester, dreading he knew not precisely what from the request of the stranger. "I demand your name."

"Edmund Tressilian of Cornwall," answered the mask. "My tongue has been bound by a promise for four-and-twenty hours,—the space is passed,—I now speak and do your lordship the justice to address myself first to you."

The thrill of astonishment which had penetrated to Leicester's very heart at hearing that name pronounced by the voice of the man he most detested, and by whom he conceived himself so deeply injured, at first rendered him immovable, but instantly gave way to such a thirst for revenge as the pilgrim in the desert feels for the water-brooks. He had but sense and self-government enough left to prevent his stabbing to the heart the audacious villain, who, after the ruin he had brought upon him, dared, with such unmoved assurance, thus to practise upon him further. Determined to suppress for the moment every symptom of agitation, in order to perceive the full scope of Tressilian's purpose, as well as to secure his own vengeance, he answered in a tone so altered by restrained passion as scarce to be intelligible,—"And what does Master Edmund Tressilian require at my hand?"

"Justice, my lord," answered Tressilian, calmly but firmly.

"Justice," said Leicester, "all men are entitled to—You, Master Tressilian, are peculiarly so, and be assured you shall have it."

"I expect nothing less from your nobleness," answered Tressilian; "but time presses, and I must speak with you to-night—May I wait on you in your chamber?"

"No," answered Leicester, sternly, "not under a roof, and that roof mine own—We will meet under the free cope of heaven."

"You are discomposed or displeased, my lord," replied Tressilian; "yet there is no occasion for distemperature. The place is equal to me, so you allow me one half-hour of your time uninterrupted."

"A shorter time will, I trust, suffice," answered Leicester—"Meet me in the Pleasance, when the Queen has retired to her chamber."

"Enough," said Tressilian, and withdrew; while a sort of rapture seemed for the moment to occupy the mind of Leicester.

"Heaven," he said, "is at last favourable to me, and has put within my reach the wretch who has branded me with this deep ignominy—who has inflicted on me this cruel agony. I will blame fate no more, since I am afforded the means of tracing the wiles by which he means still further to practise on me, and then of at once convicting and punishing his villany. To my task—to my task!—I will not sink under it now, since midnight at farthest, will bring me vengeance."

While these reflections thronged through Leicester's mind, he again made his way amid the obsequious crowd, which divided to give him passage, and resumed his place, envied and admired, beside the person of his Sovereign. But, could the bosom of him thus admired and envied, have been laid open before the inhabitants of that crowded hall, with all its dark thoughts of guilty ambition, blighted affection, deep vengeance, and conscious sense of meditated cruelty, crossing each other like spectres in the circle of some foul enchantress; which of them, from the most ambitious noble in the courtly circle, down to the most wretched menial, who lived by shifting of trenchers, would have desired to change characters with the favourite of Elizabeth, and the Lord of Kenilworth.

New tortures awaited him as soon as he had rejoined Elizabeth.

"You come in time, my lord," she said, "to decide a dispute between us ladies. Here has Sir Richard Varney asked our permission to depart from the castle with his infirm lady, having, as he tells us, your lordship's consent to his absence, so he can obtain ours. Certes, we have no will to withhold him from the affectionate charge of this poor young person—but you are to know that Sir Richard Varney hath this day shown himself so much captivated with these ladies of ours, that here is our Duchess of Rutland says, he will carry his poor insane wife no farther than the lake, plunge her in, and return a jolly widower, to dry his tears, and to make up the loss among our train. How say you, my lord?—We have seen Varney under two or three different guises—you know what are his proper attributes—think you he is capable of playing his lady such a knave's trick?"

Leicester was confounded, but the danger was urgent, and a reply absolutely necessary. "The ladies," he said, "think too lightly of one of their own sex, in supposing she could deserve such a fate, or too ill of ours, to think it could be inflicted upon an innocent female."

"Hear him, my ladies," said Elizabeth; "like all his sex, he would excuse their cruelty by imputing fickleness to us."

"Say not *us*, madam," replied the Earl; "we say that meaner women, like the lesser lights of heaven, have revolutions and phases, but who shall impute mutability to the sun, or to Elizabeth?"

The discourse presently afterwards assumed a less perilous tendency, and Leicester continued to support his part in it with spirit, at whatever expense of mental agony. So pleasing did it seem to Elizabeth, that the Castle bell had sounded midnight ere she retired from the company, a circumstance unusual in her quiet and regular habits of disposing of time. Her departure was of course the signal for breaking up the company, who dispersed to their several places of repose, to dream over the pastimes of the day, or to anticipate those of the morrow.

The unfortunate Lord of the Castle, and founder of the proud festival, retired to far different thoughts. His direction to the valet who attended him, was to send Varney instantly to his apartment. The messenger returned after some delay, and informed him that an hour had elapsed since Sir Richard Varney had left the Castle, by the postern-gate, with three other persons, one of whom was transported in a horse-litter.

"How came he to leave the castle after the watch was set?" said Leicester; "I thought he went not till day-break."

"He gave satisfactory reasons, as I understand," said the domestic, "to the guard, and, as I hear, showed your lordship's signet——"

"True—true," said the Earl; "yet he has been hasty—Do any of his attendants remain behind?"

"Michael Lambourne, my lord," said the valet, "was not to be found when Sir Richard Varney departed, and his master was much incensed at his absence. I saw him but now saddling his horse to gallop after his master."

"Bid him come hither instantly," said Leicester; "I have a message to his master."

The servant left the apartment, and Leicester traversed it for some time in deep meditation—"Varney is over-zealous," he said, "over-pressing—He loves me, I think—but he hath his own ends to serve, and he is inexorable in pursuit of them. If I rise he rises, and he hath shown himself already but too eager to rid me of this obstacle which seems to stand betwixt me and sovereignty. Yet I will not stoop to bear this disgrace. She shall be punished, but it shall be more advisedly. I already feel, even in anticipation, that over-haste would light the flames of hell in my bosom. No—one victim is enough at once, and that victim already waits me."

He seized upon writing materials, and hastily traced these words :—"Sir Richard Varney, we have resolved to defer the matter intrusted to your care, and strictly command you to proceed no farther in relation to our Countess, until our farther order. We also command your instant return to Kenilworth, as soon as you have safely bestowed that with which you are intrusted. But if the safe placing of your present charge shall detain you longer than we think for, we command you, in that case, to send back our signet-ring by a trusty and speedy messenger, we having present need of the same. And requiring your strict obedience in these things, and commending you to God's keeping, we rest your assured good friend and master,

"R. LEICESTER.

"Given at our Castle of Kenilworth, the tenth of July, in the year of Salvation one thousand five hundred and seventy-five."

As Leicester had finished and sealed this mandate, Michael Lambourne, booted up to mid-thigh, having his riding cloak girthed around him with a broad belt, and a felt cap on his head, like that of a courier, entered his apartment, ushered in by the valet.

"What is thy capacity of service ?" said the Earl.

"Equerry to your lordship's master of the horse," answered Lambourne, with his customary assurance.

"Tie up thy saucy tongue, sir," said Leicester ; "the jests that may suit Sir Richard Varney's presence, suit not mine. How soon wilt thou overtake thy master ?"

"In one hour's riding, my lord, if man and horse hold good," said Lambourne, with an instant alteration of demeanour, from an approach to familiarity to the deepest respect. The Earl measured him with his eye from top to toe.

"I have heard of thee," he said ; "men say thou art a prompt fellow in thy service, but too much given to brawling and to wassail to be trusted with things of moment."

"My lord," said Lambourne, "I have been soldier, sailor, traveller, and adventurer ; and these are all trades in which men enjoy to-day, because they have no surety of to-morrow. But though I may misuse mine own leisure, I have never neglected the duty I owe my master."

"See that it be so in this instance," said Leicester, "and it shall do thee good. Deliver this letter speedily and carefully, into Sir Richard Varney's hands."

"Does my commission reach no farther?" said Lambourne.

"No," answered Leicester, "but it deeply concerns me that it be carefully as well as hastily executed."

"I will spare neither care nor horse-flesh," answered Lambourne, and immediately took his leave.

"So, this is the end of my private audience, from which I hoped so much!" he muttered to himself, as he went through the long gallery, and down the back staircase. "Cogs bones! I thought the Earl had wanted a cast of mine office in some secret intrigue, and it all ends in carrying a letter! Well, his pleasure shall be done, however, and as his lordship well says, it may do me good another time. The child must creep ere he walk, and so must your infant courtier. I will have a look into this letter, however, which he hath sealed so sloven-like." Having accomplished this, he clapped his hands together in ecstasy, exclaiming, "The Countess—the Countess!—I have the secret that shall make or mar me.—But come forth, Bayard," he added, leading his horse into the courtyard, "for your flanks and my spurs must be presently acquainted."

Lambourne mounted, accordingly, and left the Castle by the postern-gate, where his free passage was permitted, in consequence of a message to that effect left by Sir Richard Varney.

As soon as Lambourne and the valet had left the apartment, Leicester proceeded to change his dress for a very plain one, threw his mantle around him, and taking a lamp in his hand, went by the private passage of communication to a small secret postern-door, which opened into the courtyard, near to the entrance of the Pleasance. His reflections were of a more calm and determined character than they had been at any late period, and he endeavoured to claim, even in his own eyes, the character of a man more sinned against than sinning.

In this mood the vindictive and ambitious Earl entered the superb precincts of the Pleasance, and walked slowly from the one end of the terrace to the other, his cloak wrapped around him, and his sword under his arm, without seeing any thing resembling the human form.

"I have been fooled by my own generosity," he said, "if I have suffered the villain to escape me—ay, and perhaps to go to the rescue of the Adulteress, who is so poorly guarded."

These were his thoughts, which were instantly dispelled, when turning to look back towards the entrance, he saw a human form advancing slowly from the portico, and darkening the various objects with its shadow, as passing them successively, in its approach towards him.

"Shall I strike ere I again hear his detested voice?" was Leicester's thought, as he grasped the hilt of the sword. "But no! I will see which way his vile practice tends. I will watch, disgusting as it is, the coils and mazes of the loathsome snake, ere I put forth my strength and crush him."

His hand quitted the sword-hilt, and he advanced slowly towards Tressilian, collecting, for their meeting, all the self-possession he could command, until they came front to front with each other.

Tressilian made a profound reverence, to which the Earl replied with a haughty inclination of the head, and the words, "You sought secret conference with me, sir—I am here and attentive."

"My lord," said Tressilian, "I am so earnest in that which I have to say, and so desirous to find a patient, nay, a favourable hearing, that I will stoop to exculpate myself from whatever might prejudice your lordship against me. You think me your enemy?"

"Have I not some apparent cause?" answered Leicester, perceiving that Tressilian paused for a reply.

"You do me wrong, my lord. I am a friend, but neither a dependant nor partisan of the Earl of Sussex, whom courtiers call your rival; and it is some considerable time since I ceased to consider either courts, or court-intrigues, as suited to my temper or genius."

"No doubt, sir," answered Leicester; "there are other occupations more worthy a scholar, and for such the world holds Master Tressilian—Love has his intrigues as well as ambition."

"I perceive, my lord," replied Tressilian, "you give much weight to my early attachment for the unfortunate young person of whom I am about to speak, and perhaps think I am prosecuting her cause out of rivalry, more than a sense of justice."

"No matter for my thoughts, sir," said the Earl; "proceed. You have as yet spoken of yourself only; an important worthy subject doubtless, but which, perhaps, does not altogether so deeply concern me, that I should postpone my repose to hear it. Spare me farther prelude, sir, and speak to the purpose, if indeed you have aught to say that concerns me. When you have done, I, in my turn, have something to communicate."

"I will speak, then, without farther prelude, my lord," answered Tressilian; "having to say that which, as it concerns your lordship's honour, I am confident you will not think your time wasted in listening to. I have to request an account from your lordship of the unhappy Amy Robsart, whose history is too well known to you. I regret deeply that I did not at once take this course, and make yourself judge between me and the villain by whom she is injured. My lord, she extricated herself from an unlawful and most perilous state of confinement, trusting to the effects of her own remonstrance upon her unworthy husband, and extorted from me a promise, that I would not interfere in her behalf until she had used her own efforts to have her rights acknowledged by him."

"Ha!" said Leicester, "remember you to whom you speak?"

"I speak of her unworthy husband, my lord," repeated Tressilian, "and my respect can find no softer language. The unhappy young woman is withdrawn from my knowledge, and sequestered in some secret place of this Castle,—if she be not transferred to some place of seclusion better fitted for bad designs. This must be reformed, my lord,—I speak it as authorised by her father,—and this ill-fated marriage must be avouched and proved in the Queen's presence, and the lady placed without restraint, and at her own free disposal. And, permit me to say, it concerns no one's honour that these most just demands of mine should be complied with, so much as it does that of your lordship."

The Earl stood as if he had been petrified, at the extreme coolness with which the man, whom he considered as having injured him so deeply, pleaded the cause of his criminal paramour, as if she had been an innocent woman, and he a disinterested advocate; nor was his wonder lessened by the warmth with which Tressilian seemed to demand for her the rank and situation which she had disgraced, and the advantages of which she was doubtless to share with the lover who advocated her cause with such effrontery. Tressilian had been silent for more than a minute ere the Earl recovered from the excess of his astonishment; and, considering the prepossessions with which his mind was occupied, there is little wonder that his passion gained the mastery of every other consideration. "I have heard you, Master Tressilian," said he, "without interruption, and I bless God that my ears were never before made to tingle by the words of so frontless a villain. The task of chastising you is fitter for the hangman's scourge than the sword of a nobleman, but yet,——Villain, draw and defend thyself!"

As he spoke the last words, he dropped his mantle on the ground, struck Tressilian smartly with his sheathed sword, and instantly drawing his rapier, put himself into a posture of assault. The vehement fury of his language at first filled Tressilian, in his turn, with surprise equal to what Leicester had felt when he addressed him. But astonishment gave place to resentment, when the unmerited insults of his language were followed by a blow, which immediately put to flight every thought save that of instant combat. Tressilian's sword was instantly drawn, and though perhaps somewhat inferior to Leicester in the use of the weapon, he understood it well enough to maintain the contest with great spirit, the rather that of the two he was for the time the more cool, since he could not help imputing Leicester's conduct either to actual frenzy, or to the influence of some strong delusion.

The rencontre had continued for several minutes, without either party receiving a wound, when, of a sudden, voices were heard beneath the portico, which formed the entrance of the terrace, mingled with the steps of men advancing hastily. "We are interrupted," said Leicester to his antagonist; "follow me."

At the same time a voice from the portico said, "The jackanape is right—they are tilting here."

Leicester, meanwhile, drew off Tressilian into a sort of recess behind one of the fountains, which served to conceal them, while six of the yeomen of the Queen's guard passed along the middle walk of the Pleasance, and they could hear one say to the rest, "We shall never find them to-night among all these squirting funnels, squirrel-cages, and rabbit-holes; but if we light not on them, before we reach the farther end, we will return, and mount a guard at the entrance, and so secure them till morning."

"A proper matter," said another, "the drawing of swords so near the Queen's presence, ay, and in her very palace, as 'twere!—Hang it, they must be some poor drunken game-cocks fallen to sparring—'twere pity almost we should find them—the penalty is chopping off a hand, is it not?—'twere hard to lose hand for handling a bit of steel, that comes so natural to one's gripe."

"Thou art a brawler thyself, George," said another; "but take heed, for the law stands as thou sayest."

"Ay," said the first, "an the act be not mildly construed; for thou know'st 'tis not the Queen's Palace, but my Lord of Leicester's."

"Why, for that matter, the penalty may be as severe," said another; "for an our Gracious Mistress be Queen, as she is, God save her, my lord of Leicester is as good as King."

"Hush! thou knave!" said a third; "how knowest thou who may be within hearing?"

They passed on, making a kind of careless search, but seemingly more intent on their own conversation than bent on discovering the persons who had created the nocturnal disturbance.

They had no sooner passed forward along the terrace, than Leicester, making a sign to Tressilian to follow him, glided away in an opposite direction, and escaped through the portico undiscovered. He conducted Tressilian to Mervyn's Tower, in which he was now again lodged; and then, ere parting with him, said these words, "If thou hast courage to continue and bring to an end what is thus broken off, be near me when the court goes forth to-morrow—we shall find a time, and I will give you a signal when it is fitting."

"My lord," said Tressilian, "at another time I might have inquired the meaning of this strange and furious inveteracy against me. But you have laid that on my shoulder, which only blood can wash away; and were you as high as your proudest wishes ever carried you, I would have from you satisfaction for my wounded honour."

On these terms they parted, but the adventures of the night were not yet ended with Leicester. He was compelled to pass by Saintlowe's Tower, in order to gain the private passage which led to his own chamber, and in the entrance thereof he met Lord Hunsdon half clothed, and with a naked sword under his arm.

"Are you awakened, too, with this 'larum, my Lord of Leicester?" said the old soldier. "'Tis well—By gog's nails, the nights are as noisy as the day in this Castle of yours. Some two hours since I was awakened by the screams of that poor brain-sick Lady Varney, whom her husband was forcing away. I promise you, it required both your warrant and the Queen's to keep me from entering into the game, and cutting that Varney of yours over the head; and now there is a brawl down in the Pleasance, or what call you the stone terrace-walk, where all yonder gimcracks stand?"

The first part of the old man's speech went through the Earl's heart like a knife; to the last he answered that he himself had heard the clash of swords, and had come down to take order with those who had been so insolent so near the Queen's presence.

"Nay, then," said Hunsdon, "I will be glad of you lordship's company."

Leicester was thus compelled to turn back with the rough old Lord to the Pleasance, where Hunsdon heard from the yeomen of the guard, who were under his immediate command, the unsuccessful search they had made for the authors of the disturbance; and bestowed for their pains some round dozen of curses on them, as lazy knaves and blind whoresons.

Leicester also thought it necessary to seem angry that no discovery had been effected; but at length suggested to Lord Hunsdon, that after all it could only be some foolish young men, who had been drinking healths pottle-deep, and who would be sufficiently scared by the search which had taken place after them. Hunsdon, who was himself attached to his cup, allowed that a pint-flagon might cover many of the follies which it had caused. "But," added he, "unless your lordship will be less liberal in your housekeeping, and restrain the overflow of ale, and wine, and wassail, I foresee it will end in my having some of these good fellows into the guard-house, and treating them to a dose of the strappado—And with this warning, good-night to you."

Joyful at being rid of his company, Leicester took leave of him at the entrance of his lodging, where they had first met, and entering the private passage, took up the lamp which he had left there, and by its expiring light found the way to his own apartment.

XXVII

The amusement with which Elizabeth and her court were next day to be regaled, was an exhibition by the true-hearted men of Coventry, who were to represent the strife between the English and the Danes, agreeably to a custom long preserved in their ancient borough, and warranted for truth by old histories and chronicles. In this pageant, one party of the townsfolk presented the Saxons and the other the Danes, and set forth, both in rude rhymes and with hard blows, the contentions of these two fierce nations, and the Amazonian courage of the English women, who, according to the story, were the principal agents in the general massacre of the Danes, which took place at Hocktide, in the year of God 1012. This sport, which had been long a favourite pastime with the men of Coventry, found favour in the eyes of Elizabeth, who said that such toys occupied, without offence, the minds of many, who, lacking them, might find worse subjects of pastime; and that their pastors, however commendable for learning and godliness, were somewhat too sour in preaching against the pastimes of their flocks; and so the pageant was permitted to proceed.

Accordingly, after a morning repast, which Master Lancham calls an ambrosial breakfast, the principal persons of the court in attendance upon her Majesty, pressed to the Gallery Tower, to witness the approach of the two contending parties of English and Danes; and after a signal had been given, the gate which opened in the circuit of the Chase was thrown wide to admit them. On they came, foot and horse; for some of the more ambitious burghers and yeomen had put themselves into fantastic dresses, imitating knights, in order to resemble the chivalry of the two different nations. However, to prevent fatal accidents, they were not permitted to appear on real horses, but had only license to accoutre themselves with those hobbyhorses, as they are called, which anciently formed the chief delight of a morrice-dance, and which still are exhibited on the stage, in the grand battle fought at the conclusion of Mr. Baye's tragedy.

These rough rural gambols may not altogether agree with the reader's preconceived idea of an entertainment presented before Elizabeth, in whose reign letters revived with such brilliancy, and whose court, governed by a female, whose sense of propriety was equal to her strength of mind, was no less distinguished for delicacy and refinement than her councils for wisdom and fortitude. But whether from the political wish to seem interested in popular sports, or whether from a spark of old Henry's rough masculine spirit, which Elizabeth sometimes displayed, it is certain the Queen laughed heartily at the imitation, or rather burlesque of chivalry, which was presented in the Coventry play. She called near her person the Earl of Sussex and Lord Hunsdon, partly perhaps to make amends to the former for the long and private audiences with which she had indulged the Earl of Leicester, by engaging him in conversation upon a pastime, which better suited his taste than those pageants that were furnished forth from the stores of antiquity. The disposition which the Queen showed to laugh and jest with her military leaders, gave the Earl of Leicester the opportunity he had been watching for withdrawing from the royal presence, which to the court around, so well had he chosen his time, had the graceful appearance of leaving his rival free access to the Queen's person, instead of availing himself of his right as her landlord, to stand perpetually betwixt others and the light of her countenance.

Leicester's thoughts, however, had a far different object from mere courtesy; for no sooner did he see the Queen fairly engaged in conversation with Sussex and Hunsdon, behind whose back stood Sir Nicholas Blount, grinning from ear to ear at each word which was spoken, than, making a sign to Tressilian, who, according to appointment, watched his motions at a little distance, he extricated himself from the press, and walking towards the Chase, made his way through the crowds of ordinary spectators, who, with open mouth, stood gazing on the battle of the English and the Danes. When he had accomplished this, which was a work of some difficulty, he shot another glance behind him to see that Tressilian had been equally successful, and as soon as he saw him also free from the crowd, he led the way to a small thicket, behind which stood a lackey, with two horses ready saddled. He flung himself on the one, and made signs to Tressilian to mount the other, who obeyed without speaking a single word.

Leicester then spurred his horse, and galloped without stopping until he reached a sequestered spot, environed by lofty oaks, about a mile's distance from the Castle, and in an opposite direction from the scene to which curiosity was drawing every spectator. He there dismounted, bound his horse to a tree, and only pronouncing the words, "Here there is no risk of interruption," laid his cloak across his saddle, and drew his sword.

Tressilian imitated his example punctually, yet could not forbear saying, as he drew his weapon, "My lord, as I have been known to many as one who does not fear death, when placed in balance with honour, methinks I may, without derogation, ask, wherefore, in the name of all that is honourable, your lordship has dared to offer me such a mark of disgrace, as places us on these terms, with respect to each other?"

"If you like not such marks of my scorn," replied the Earl, "betake yourself instantly to your weapon, lest I repeat the usage you complain of."

"It shall not need, my lord," said Tressilian. "God judge betwixt us! and your blood, if you fall, be on your own head."

He had scarce completed the sentence when they instantly closed in combat.

But Leicester, who was a perfect master of defence among all other exterior accomplishments of the time, had seen, on the preceding night, enough of Tressilian's strength and skill, to make him fight with more caution than heretofore, and prefer a secure revenge to a hasty one. For some minutes they fought with equal skill and fortune, till, in a desperate lounge which Leicester successfully put aside, Tressilian exposed himself at disadvantage; and in, a subsequent attempt to close, the Earl forced his sword from his hand, and stretched him on the ground. With a grim smile he held the point of his rapier within two inches of the throat of his fallen adversary, and placing his foot at the same time upon his breast, bid him confess his villainous wrongs towards him, and prepare for death.

"I have no villany nor wrong towards thee to confess," answered Tressilian, "and am better prepared for death than thou. Use thine advantage as thou wilt, and may God forgive you! I have given you no cause for this."

"No cause!" exclaimed the Earl, "no cause!—but why parley with such a slave?—Die a liar, as thou hast lived!"

He had withdrawn his arm for the purpose of striking the fatal blow, when it was suddenly seized from behind.

The Earl turned in wrath to shake off the unexpected obstacle, but was surprised to find that a strange-looking boy had hold of his sword-arm, and clung to it with such tenacity of grasp, that he could not shake him off without a considerable struggle, in the course of which Tressilian had opportunity to rise and possess himself once more of his weapon. Leicester again turned towards him with looks of unabated ferocity, and the combat would have recommenced with still more desperation on both sides, had not the boy clung to Lord Leicester's knees, and in a shrill tone implored him to listen one moment ere he prosecuted this quarrel.

"Stand up, and let me go," said Leicester, "or by Heaven, I will pierce thee with my rapier!—What hast thou to do to bar my way to revenge?"

"Much—much!" exclaimed the undaunted boy; "since my folly has been the cause of these bloody quarrels between you, and perchance of worse evils. Oh, if you would ever again enjoy the peace of an innocent mind, if you hope again to sleep in peace and unhaunted by remorse, take so much leisure as to peruse this letter, and then do as you list."

While he spoke in this eager and earnest manner, to which his singular features and voice gave a goblin-like effect, he held up to Leicester a packet, secured with a long tress of woman's hair, of a beautiful light brown colour. Enraged as he was, nay, almost blinded with fury to see his destined revenge so strangely frustrated, the Earl of Leicester could not resist this extraordinary supplicant. He snatched the letter from his hand—changed colour as he looked on the superscription—undid, with faltering hand, the knot which secured it—glanced over the contents, and staggering back, would have fallen, had he not rested against the trunk of a tree, where he stood for an instant, his eyes bent on the letter, and his sword-point turned to the ground, without seeming to be conscious of the presence of an antagonist, towards whom he had shown little mercy, and who might in turn have taken him at advantage. But for such revenge Tressilian was too noble-minded—he also stood still in surprise, waiting the issue of this strange fit of passion, but holding his weapon ready to defend himself in case of need, against some new and sudden attack on the part of Leicester, whom he again suspected to be under the influence of actual frenzy. The boy, indeed, he easily recognised as his old acquaintance Dickon, whose face once seen, was scarcely to be forgotten; but how he came hither at so critical a moment, why his interference was so energetic, and above all, how it came to produce so powerful an effect upon Leicester, were questions which he could not solve.

But the letter was of itself powerful enough to work effects yet more wonderful. It was that which the unfortunate Amy had written to her husband, in which she alleged the reasons and manner of her flight from Cumnor Place, informed him of her having made her way to Kenilworth to enjoy his protection, and mentioned the circumstances which had compelled her to take refuge in Tressilian's apartment, earnestly requesting he would, without delay, assign her a more suitable asylum. The letter concluded with the most earnest expressions of devoted attachment, and submission to his will in all things, and particularly respecting her situation and place of residence, conjuring him only that she might not be placed under the guardianship or restraint of Varney.

The letter dropped from Leicester's hand when he had perused it. "Take my sword," he said, "Tressilian, and pierce my heart, as I would but now have pierced yours!"

"My lord," said Tressilian, "you have done me great wrong; but something within my breast ever whispered that it was by egregious error."

"Error, indeed!" said Leicester, and handed him the letter; "I have been made to believe a man of honour a villain, and the best and purest of creatures a false profligate. Wretched boy, why comes this letter now, and where has the bearer lingered?"

"I dare not tell you, my lord," said the boy, withdrawing, as if to keep beyond his reach; "but here comes one who was the messenger."

Wayland at the same moment came up; and, interrogated by Leicester, hastily detailed all the circumstances of his escape with Amy—the fatal practices which had driven her to flight—and her anxious desire to throw herself under the instant protection of her husband—pointing out the evidence of the domestics of Kenilworth, "who could not," he observed, "but remember her eager inquiries after the Earl of Leicester on her first arrival."

"The villains!" exclaimed Leicester; "but oh, that worst of villains, Varney!—and she is even now in his power!"

"But not, I trust in God," said Tressilian, "with any commands of fatal import?"

"No, no, no!" exclaimed the Earl, hastily. "I said something in madness—but it was recalled, fully recalled, by a hasty messenger; and she is now—she must now be safe."

"Yes," said Tressilian, "she *must* be safe, and I *must* be assured of her safety. My own quarrel with you is ended, my lord; but there is another to begin with the seducer of Amy Robsart, who has screened his guilt under the cloak of the infamous Varney."

"The *seducer* of Amy!" replied Leicester, with a voice like thunder; "say her husband!—her misguided, blinded, most unworthy husband! She is as surely Countess of Leicester as I am belted Earl. Nor can you, sir, point out that manner of justice which I will not render her at my own free will. I need scarce say, I fear not your compulsion."

The generous nature of Tressilian was instantly turned from consideration of anything personal to himself, and centred at once upon Amy's welfare. He had by no means undoubting confidence in the fluctuating resolutions of Leicester, whose mind seemed to him agitated beyond the government of calm reason; neither did he, notwithstanding the assurances he had received, think Amy safe in the hands of his dependants. "My lord," he said calmly, "I mean you no offence, and am far from seeking a quarrel. But my duty to Sir Hugh Robsart compels me to carry this matter instantly to the Queen, that the Countess's rank may be acknowledged in her person."

"You shall not need, sir," replied the Earl haughtily; "do not dare to interfere. No voice but Dudley's shall proclaim Dudley's infamy—to Elizabeth herself will I tell it, and then for Cumnor Place with the speed of life and death!"

So saying, he unbound his horse from the tree, threw himself into the saddle, and rode at full gallop towards the Castle.

"Take me before you, Master Tressilian," said the boy, seeing Tressilian mount in the same haste—"my tale is not all told out, and I need your protection."

Tressilian complied, and followed the Earl, though at a less furious rate. By the way the boy confessed, with much contrition, that in resentment at Wayland's evading all his inquiries concerning the lady, after Dickon conceived he had in various ways merited his confidence, he had purloined from him in revenge the letter with which Amy had intrusted him for the Earl of Leicester. His purpose was to have restored it to him that evening, as he reckoned himself sure of meeting with him, in consequence of Wayland's having to perform the part of Arion in the pageant. He was indeed something alarmed when he saw to whom the letter was addressed; but he argued that, as Leicester did not return to Kenilworth until that evening, it would be again in the possession of the proper messenger, as soon as, in the nature of things, it could possibly be delivered. But Wayland came not to the pageant, having been in the interim expelled by Lambourne from the castle, and the boy not being able to find him, or to get speech of Tressilian, and finding himself in possession of a letter addressed to no less a person than the Earl of Leicester, became much afraid of the consequences of his frolic. The caution, and indeed the alarm, which Wayland had expressed respecting Varney and Lambourne, led him to judge, that the letter must be designed for the Earl's own hand, and that he might prejudice the lady by giving it to any of the domestics. He made an attempt or two to obtain an audience of Leicester, but the singularity of his features, and the meanness of his appearance, occasioned his being always repulsed by the insolent menials whom he applied to for that purpose. Once, indeed, he had nearly succeeded, when, in prowling about, he found in the grotto the casket which he knew to belong to the unlucky Countess, having seen it on her journey; for nothing escaped his prying eye. Having strove in vain to restore it either to Tressilian or the Countess, he put it into the hands, as we have seen, of Leicester himself, but unfortunately he did not recognise him in his disguise.

At length the boy thought he was on the point of succeeding, when the Earl came down to the lower part of the hall; but just as he was about to accost him, he was prevented by Tressilian. As sharp in ear as in wit, the boy heard the appointment settled betwixt them, to take place in the Pleasance, and resolved to add a third to the party, in hopes that, either in coming or in returning, he might find an opportunity of delivering the letter to Leicester; for strange stories began to flit among the domestics, which alarmed him for the lady's safety. Accident, however, detained Dickon a little behind the Earl, and as he reached the arcade he saw them engaged in combat; in consequence of which he hastened to alarm the guard, having little doubt that what bloodshed took place betwixt them might arise out of his own frolic. Continuing to lurk in the portico, he heard the second appointment which Leicester, at parting, assigned to Tressilian, and was keeping them in view during the encounter of the Coventry men, when, to his surprise, he recognised Wayland in the crowd, much disguised, indeed, but not sufficiently so to escape the prying glance of his old comrade. They drew aside out of the crowd to explain their situation to each other. The boy confessed to Wayland what we have above told, and the artist in return informed him that his deep anxiety for the fate of the unfortunate lady had brought him back to the neighbourhood of the Castle, upon his learning that morning at a village about ten miles distant that Varney and Lambourne, whose violence he dreaded, had both left Kenilworth overnight.

While they spoke, they saw Leicester and Tressilian separate themselves from the crowd, dogged them until they mounted their horses, when the boy, whose speed of foot has been before mentioned, though he could not possibly keep up with them, yet arrived, as we have seen, soon enough to save Tressilian's life. The boy had just finished his tale when they arrived at the Gallery Tower.

XXVIII

As Tressilian rode along the bridge, lately the scene of so much riotous sport, he could not but observe that men's countenances had singularly changed during the space of his brief absence. The mock fight was over, but the men, still habited in their masquing suits, stood together in groups, like the inhabitants of a city who have been just startled by some strange and alarming news.

When he reached the base-court, appearances were the same—domestics, retainers, and under officers, stood together and whispered, bending their eyes towards the windows of the great hall with looks which seemed at once alarmed and mysterious.

Sir Nicholas Blount was the first person of his own particular acquaintance Tressilian saw, who left him no time to make inquiries, but greeted him with, "God help thy heart, Tressilian, thou art fitter for a clown than a courtier—thou canst not attend as becomes one who follows her Majesty.—Here you are called for, wished for, waited for—no man but you will serve the turn; and thither you come with a misbegotten brat on thy horse's neck, as if thou wert dry nurse to some sucking devil, and wert just returned from airing."

"Why, what is the matter?" said Tressilian, letting go the boy, who sprung to ground like a feather, and himself dismounting at the same time.

"Why, no one knows the matter," replied Blount; "I cannot smell it out myself, though I have a nose like other courtiers. Only my Lord of Leicester has galloped along the bridge, as if he would have rode over all in his passage, demanding an audience of the Queen, and is closeted even now with her, and Burleigh, and Walsingham—and you are called for—but whether the matter be treason or worse no one knows."

"He speaks true, by Heaven!" said Raleigh, who that instant appeared; "you must immediately to the Queen's presence."

"Be not rash, Raleigh," said Blount, "remember his boots—For Heaven's sake, go to my chamber, dear Tressilian, and don my new bloom-coloured silken hose—I have worn them but twice."

"Pshaw!" answered Tressilian; "do thou take care of this boy, Blount; be kind to him, and look he escapes you not—much depends on him."

So saying, he followed Raleigh hastily, leaving honest Blount with the bridle of his horse in one hand, and the boy in the other. Blount gave a long look after him.

"Nobody," he said, "calls me to these mysteries—and he leaves me here to play horse-keeper and child-keeper at once. I could excuse the one, for I love a good horse naturally; but to be plagued with a bratchet whelp.—Whence come ye, my fair-favoured little gossip?"

"From the Fens," answered the boy.

"And what didst thou learn there, forward imp?"

"To catch gulls, with their webbed feet and yellow stockings," said the boy.

"Umph!" said Blount, looking down on his own immense roses—"Nay, then the devil take him asks thee more questions."

Meantime Tressilian traversed the full length of the great hall, in which the astonished courtiers formed various groups, and were whispering mysteriously together, while all kept their eyes fixed on the door, which led from the upper end of the hall into the Queen's withdrawing apartment. Raleigh pointed to the door—Tressilian knocked, and was instantly admitted. Many a neck was stretched to gain a view into the interior of the apartment; but the tapestry which covered the door on the inside was dropped too suddenly to admit the slightest gratification of curiosity.

Upon entrance, Tressilian found himself, not without a strong palpitation of heart, in the presence of Elizabeth, who was walking to and fro in a violent agitation, which she seemed to scorn to conceal, while two or three of her most sage and confidential counsellors exchanged anxious looks with each other, but delayed speaking till her wrath had abated. Before the empty chair of state in which she had been seated, and which was half pushed aside by the violence with which she had started from it, knelt Leicester, his arms crossed, and his brows bent on the ground, still and motionless as the effigies upon a sepulchre. Beside him stood the Lord Shrewsbury, then Earl Marshal of England, holding his baton of office—the Earl's sword was unbuckled, and lay before him on the floor.

"Ho, sir!" said the Queen, coming close up to Tressilian, and stamping on the floor with the action and manner of Henry himself; "*you* knew of this fair work—*you* are an accomplice in this deception which has been practised on us—*you* have been a main cause of our doing injustice?" Tressilian dropped on his knee before the Queen, his sense showing him the risk of attempting any defence at that moment of irritation. "Art dumb, sirrah!" she continued; "thou know'st of this affair, dost thou not?"

"Not, gracious madam, that this poor lady was Countess of Leicester."

"Nor shall any one know her for such," said Elizabeth. "Death of my life! Countess of Leicester!—I say Dame Amy Dudley—and well if she hath not cause to write herself widow of the traitor Robert Dudley."

"Madam," said Leicester, "do with me what it may be your will to do—but work no injury on this gentleman—he hath in no way deserved it."

"And will he be the better for thy intercession," said the Queen, leaving Tressilian, who slowly arose, and rushing to Leicester, who continued kneeling—"the better for thy intercession, thou doubly false—thou doubly forsworn?—of thy intercession, whose villainy hath made me ridiculous to my subjects, and odious to myself?—I could tear out mine eyes for their blindness!"

Burleigh here ventured to interpose.

"Madam," he said, "remember that you are a Queen—Queen of England—mother of your people. Give not way to this wild storm of passion."

Elizabeth turned round to him, while a tear actually twinkled in her proud and angry eye. "Burleigh," she said, "thou art a statesman—thou dost not, thou canst not, comprehend half the scorn—half the misery, that man has poured on me!"

With the utmost caution—with the deepest reverence, Burleigh took her hand at the moment he saw her heart was at the fullest, and led her aside to an oriel window, apart from the others.

"Madam," he said, "I am a statesman, but I am also a man—a man already grown old in your councils, who have not, and cannot have a wish on earth but your glory and happiness—I pray you to be composed."

Burleigh stooped to kiss her hand with affection, and—rare in the annals of courts—a tear of true sympathy dropped from the eye of the minister on the hand of his Sovereign.

It is probable that the consciousness of possessing this sympathy, aided Elizabeth in supporting her mortification, and suppressing her extreme resentment; but she was still more moved by fear that her passion should betray to the public the affront and the disappointment, which, alike as a woman and a Queen, she was so anxious to conceal. She turned from Burleigh, and sternly paced the hall till her features had recovered their usual dignity, and her mien its wonted stateliness of regular motion.

"Our Sovereign is her noble self once more," whispered Burleigh to Walsingham; "mark what she does, and take heed you thwart her not."

She then approached Leicester, and said, with calmness, "My Lord Shrewsbury, we discharge you of your prisoner. My Lord of Leicester, rise and take up your sword—a quarter of an hour's restraint, under the custody of our Marshal, my lord, is, we think, no high penance for months of falsehood practised upon us. We will now hear the progress of this affair."—She then seated herself in her chair, and said, "You, Tressilian, step forward, and say what you know."

Tressilian told his story, generously suppressing as much as he could what affected Leicester, and saying nothing of their having twice actually fought together. It is very probable that, in doing so, he did the Earl good service; for had the Queen at that instant found anything on account of which she could vent her wrath upon him without laying open sentiments of which she was ashamed, it might have fared hard with him. She paused when Tressilian had finished his tale.

"We will take that Wayland," she said, "into our own service, and place the boy in our Secretary-office for instruction, that he may in future use discretion towards letters. For you, Tressilian, you did wrong in not communicating the whole truth to us, and your promise not to do so was both imprudent and undutiful. Yet, having given your word to this unhappy lady, it was the part of a man and a gentleman to keep it; and on the whole, we esteem you for the character you have sustained in this matter.—My Lord of Leicester, it is now your turn to tell us the truth, an exercise to which you seem of late to have been too much a stranger."

Accordingly, she extorted, by successive questions, the whole history of his first acquaintance with Amy Robsart—their marriage—his jealousy—the causes on which it was founded, and many particulars besides. Leicester's confession, for such it might be called, was wrenched from him piecemeal, yet was upon the whole accurate, excepting that he totally omitted to mention that he had, by implication, or otherwise, assented to Varney's designs upon the life of his Countess. Yet the consciousness of this was what at that moment lay nearest to his heart; and although he trusted in great measure to the very positive counter-orders which he had sent by Lambourne, it was his purpose to set out for Cumnor Place, in person, as soon as he should be dismissed from the presence of the Queen, who, he concluded, would presently leave Kenilworth.

But the Earl reckoned without his host. It is true, his presence and his communications were gall and wormwood to his once partial mistress. But, barred from every other and more direct mode of revenge, the Queen perceived that she gave her false suitor torture by these inquiries, and dwelt on them for that reason, no more regarding the pain which she herself experienced, than the savage cares for the searing of his own hands by grasping the hot pincers with which he tears the flesh of his captive enemy.

At length, however, the haughty lord, like a deer that turns to bay, gave intimation that his patience was failing. "Madam," he said, "I have been much to blame—more than even your just resentment has expressed. Yet, madam, let me say, that my guilt, if it be unpardonable, was not unprovoked; and that, if beauty and condescending dignity could seduce the frail heart of a human being, I might plead both, as the causes of my concealing this secret from your Majesty."

The Queen was so much struck with this reply, which Leicester took care should be heard by no one but herself, that she was for the moment silenced, and the Earl had the temerity to pursue his advantage. "Your Grace, who has pardoned so much, will excuse my throwing myself on your royal mercy for those expressions, which were yester-morning accounted but a light offence."

The Queen fixed her eyes on him while she replied, "Now, by Heaven, my lord, thy effrontery passes the bounds of belief, as well as patience! But it shall avail thee nothing.—What, ho! my lords, come all and hear the news—My Lord of Leicester's stolen marriage has cost me a husband, and England a King. His lordship is patriarchal in his tastes—one wife at a time was insufficient, and he designed us the honour of his left hand. Now, is not this too insolent,—that I could not grace him with a few marks of court-favour, but he must presume to think my hand and crown at his disposal?—You, however, think better of me; and I can pity this ambitious man, as I could a child, whose bubble of soap has burst between his hands. We go to the presence-chamber—My Lord of Leicester, we command your close attendance on us."

All was eager expectation in the hall, and what was the universal astonishment, when the Queen said to those next her, "The revels of Kenilworth are not yet exhausted, my lords and ladies—we are to solemnise the noble owner's marriage."

There was a universal expression of surprise.

"It is true, on our royal word," said the Queen; "he hath kept this a secret even from us, that he might surprise us with it at this very place and time. I see you are dying of curiosity to know the happy bride—It is Amy Robsart, the same who, to make up the May-game yesterday, figured in the pageant as the wife of his servant Varney."

"For God's sake, madam," said the Earl, approaching her with a mixture of humility, vexation, and shame in his countenance, and speaking so low as to be heard by no one else, "take my head, as you threatened in your anger, and spare me these taunts! Urge not a falling man—tread not on a crushed worm."

"A worm, my lord," said the Queen, in the same tone; "nay, a snake is the nobler reptile, and the more exact similitude—the frozen snake you wot of, which was warmed in a certain bosom——"

"For your own sake—for mine, madam," said the Earl—"while there is yet some reason left in me——"

"Speak aloud, my lord," said Elizabeth, "and at farther distance, so please you—your breath thaws our ruff. What have you to ask of us?"

"Permission," said the unfortunate Earl, humbly, "to travel to Cumnor Place."

"To fetch home your bride belike?—Why, ay,—that is but right—for, as we have heard, she is indifferently cared for there. But, my lord, you go not in person—we have counted upon passing certain days in this Castle of Kenilworth, and it were slight courtesy to leave us without a landlord during our residence here. Under your favour, we cannot think to incur such disgrace in the eyes of our subjects. Tressilian shall go to Cumnor Place instead of you, and with him some gentleman who hath been sworn of our chamber, lest my Lord of Leicester should be again jealous of his old rival.—Whom wouldst thou have to be in commission with thee, Tressilian?"

Tressilian, with humble deference, suggested the name of Raleigh.

"Why, ay," said the Queen; "so God ha' me, thou hast made a good choice. He is a young knight besides, and to deliver a lady from prison is an appropriate first adventure.—Cumnor Place is little better than a prison, you are to know, my lords and ladies.—Besides, there are certain faitours there whom we would willingly have in fast keeping. You will furnish them, Master Secretary, with the warrant necessary to secure the bodies of Richard Varney and the foreign Alasco, dead or alive. Take a sufficient force with you, gentlemen—

bring the lady here in all honour—lose no time, and God be with you!"

They bowed and left the presence.

Who shall describe how the rest of that day was spent at Kenilworth? The Queen, who seemed to have remained there for the sole purpose of mortifying and taunting the Earl of Leicester, showed herself as skilful in that female art of vengeance, as she was in the science of wisely governing her people. The train of state soon caught the signal, and, as he walked among his own splendid preparations, the Lord of Kenilworth, in his own Castle, already experienced the lot of a disgraced courtier, in the slight regard and cold manners of alienated friends, and the ill-concealed triumph of avowed and open enemies. Sussex, from his natural military frankness of disposition, Burleigh and Walsingham, from their penetrating and prospective sagacity, and some of the ladies, from the compassion of their sex, were the only persons in the crowded court who retained towards him the countenance they had borne in the morning.

So much had Leicester been accustomed to consider court-favour as the principal object of his life, that all other sensations, were, for the time, lost in the agony which his haughty spirit felt at the succession of petty insults and studied neglects to which he had been subjected; but when he retired to his own chamber for the night, that long fair tress of hair which had once secured Amy's letter, fell under his observation, and with the influence of a counter-charm, awakened his heart to nobler and more natural feelings. He kissed it a thousand times; and while he recollected that he had it always in his power to shun the mortifications which he had that day undergone, by retiring into a dignified and even prince-like seclusion, with the beautiful and beloved partner of his future life, he felt that he could rise above the revenge which Elizabeth had condescended to take.

Accordingly, on the following day, the whole conduct of the Earl displayed so much dignified equanimity; he seemed so solicitous about the accommodations and amusements of his guests, yet so indifferent to their personal demeanour towards him; so respectfully distant to the Queen, yet so patient of her harassing displeasure, that Elizabeth changed her manner to him, and, though cold and distant, ceased to offer him any direct affront. She intimated also with some sharpness to others around her, who thought they were consulting her pleasure in showing a neglectful conduct to the Earl, that while they remained at Kenilworth, they ought to show the civility due from guests to the Lord of the Castle. In short, matters were so far changed in twenty-four hours, that some of the more experienced and sagacious courtiers foresaw a strong possibility of Leicester's restoration to favour, and regulated their demeanour towards him, as those who might one day claim merit for not having deserted him in adversity. It is time, however, to leave these intrigues, and follow Tressilian and Raleigh on their journey.

The troop consisted of six persons; for, besides Wayland, they had in company a royal pursuivant and two stout serving-men. All were well armed, and travelled as fast as it was possible with justice to their horses, which had a long journey before them. They endeavoured to procure some tidings as they rode along of Varney and his party, but could hear none, as they had travelled in the dark. At a small village about twelve miles from Kenilworth, where they gave some refreshment to their horses, a poor clergyman, the curate of the place, came out of a small cottage, and entreated any of the company who might know aught of surgery, to look in for an instant on a dying man.

The empiric Wayland undertook to do his best, and as the curate conducted him to the spot, he learned that the man had been found on the high road about a mile from the village, by labourers, as they were going to their work on the preceding morning, and the curate had given him shelter in his house. He had received a gun-shot wound which seemed to be obviously mortal, but whether in a broil or from robbers they could not learn, as he was in a fever, and spoke nothing connectedly. Wayland entered the dark and lowly apartment, and no sooner had the curate drawn aside the curtain, than he knew in the distorted features of the patient the countenance of Michael Lambourne. Under pretence of seeking something which he wanted, Wayland hastily apprised his fellow-travellers of this extraordinary circumstance; and both Tressilian and Raleigh, full of boding apprehensions, hastened to the curate's house to see the dying man.

The wretch was by this time in the agonies of death, from which a much better surgeon than Wayland could not have rescued him, for the bullet had passed clear through his body. He was sensible, however, at least in part, for he knew Tressilian, and made signs that he wished him to stoop over his bed. Tressilian did so, and after some inarticulate murmurs, in which the names of Varney and Lady Leicester were alone distinguishable, Lambourne bade him "make haste, or he would come too late." It was in vain Tressilian urged the patient for further information; he seemed to become in some degree delirious, and when he again made a signal to attract Tressilian's attention, it was only for the purpose of desiring him to inform his uncle, Giles Gosling of the Black Bear, that "he had died without his shoes after all." A convulsion verified his words a few minutes after, and the travellers derived nothing from having met with him, saving the obscure fears concerning the fate of the Countess, which his dying words were calculated to convey, and which induced them to urge their journey with their utmost speed, pressing horses in the Queen's name, when those which they rode became unfit for service.

XXIX

We are now to return to that part of our story where we intimated that Varney, possessed of the authority of the Earl of Leicester, and of the Queen's permission to the same effect hastened to secure himself against discovery of his perfidy, by removing the Countess from Kenilworth Castle. He had proposed to set forth early in the morning, but reflecting that the Earl might relent in the interim and seek another interview with the Countess, he resolved to prevent, by immediate departure, all chance of what would probably have ended in his detection and ruin. For this purpose he called for Lambourne, and was exceedingly incensed to find that his trusty attendant was abroad on some ramble in the neighbouring village, or elsewhere. As his return was expected, Sir Richard commanded that he should prepare himself for attending him on an immediate journey, and follow him in case he returned after his departure.

In the meanwhile, Varney used the ministry of a servant called Robin Tider, one to whom the mysteries of Cumnor Place were already in some degree known, as he had been there more than once in attendance on the Earl. To this man, whose character resembled that of Lambourne, though he was neither quite so prompt nor altogether so profligate, Varney gave command to have three horses saddled, and to prepare a horse-litter, and have them in readiness at the postern-gate. The natural enough excuse of his lady's insanity, which was now universally believed, accounted for the secrecy with which she was to be removed from the Castle, and he reckoned on the same apology in case the unfortunate Amy's resistance or screams should render such necessary. The agency of Anthony Foster was indispensable, and that Varney now went to secure.

The horror of Amy may be conceived, when, starting from a broken slumber, she saw at her bedside Varney, the man on earth she most feared and hated. It was even a consolation to see that he was not alone, though she had so much reason to dread his sullen companion.

"Madam," said Varney, "there is no time for ceremony. my Lord of Leicester, having fully considered the exigencies of the time, sends you his orders immediately to accompany us on our return to Cumnor Place. See, here is his signet, in token of his instant and pressing commands."

"It is false!" said the Countess; "thou hast stolen the warrant—thou, who art capable of every villany, from the blackest to the basest!"

"It is TRUE, madam," replied Varney; "so *true*, that if you do not instantly arise, and prepare to attend us, we must compel you to obey your orders."

"Compel!—thou darest not put it to that issue, base as thou art," exclaimed the unhappy Countess.

"That remains to be proved, madam," said Varney, who had determined on intimidation as the only means of subduing her high spirit; "if you put me to it you will find me a rough groom of the chambers."

It was at this threat that Amy screamed so fearfully, that had it not been for the received opinion of her insanity, she would quickly have had Lord Hunsdon and others to her aid. Perceiving, however, that her cries were vain, she appealed to Foster in the most affecting terms, conjuring him, as his daughter Janet's honour and purity were dear to him, not to permit her to be treated with unwomanly violence.

"Why, madam, wives must obey their husbands—there's Scripture warrant for it," said Foster; "and if you will dress yourself, and come with us patiently, there's no one shall lay finger on you while I can draw a pistol-trigger."

Seeing no help arrive, and comforted even by the dogged language of Foster, the Countess promised to rise and dress herself, if they would agree to retire from the room. Varney at the same time assured her of all safety and honour while in their hands, and promised, that he himself would not approach her, since his presence was so displeasing. Her husband, he added, would be at Cumnor Place within twenty-four hours after they had reached it.

Somewhat comforted by this assurance, upon which, however, she saw little reason to rely, the unhappy Amy made her toilette by the assistance of the lantern which they left with her when they quitted the apartment.

Weeping, trembling, and praying, the unfortunate lady dressed herself—with sensations how different from the days in which she was wont to decorate herself in all the pride of conscious beauty! She endeavoured to delay the completing her dress as long as she could, until, terrified by the impatience of Varney, she was obliged to declare herself ready to attend them.

When they were about to move, the Countess clung to Foster with such an appearance of terror at Varney's approach that the latter protested to her, with a deep oath, that he had no intention whatever of even coming near her. "If you do but consent to execute your husband's will in quietness, you shall," he said, "see but little of me. I will leave you undisturbed to the care of the usher whom your good taste prefers."

"My husband's will!" she exclaimed. "But it is the will of God, and let that be sufficient to me.—I will go with Master Foster as unresistingly as ever did a literal sacrifice. He is a father at least; and will have decency, if not humanity. For thee, Varney, were it my latest word, thou art an equal stranger to both."

Varney replied only she was at liberty to choose, and walked some paces before them to show the way; while, half leaning on Foster, and half carried by him, the Countess was transported from Saintlowe's Tower to the postern-gate, where Tider waited with the litter and horses.

The Countess was placed in the former without resistance. She saw with some satisfaction that while Foster and Tider rode close by the litter, which the latter conducted, the dreaded Varney lingered behind, and was soon lost in darkness. A little while she strove, as the road winded round the verge of the lake, to keep sight of those stately towers which called her husband lord, and which still in some places sparkled with lights, where wassailers were yet revelling. But when the direction of the road rendered this no longer possible, she drew back her head, and sinking down in the litter, recommended herself to the care of Providence.

Besides the desire of inducing the Countess to proceed quietly on her journey, Varney had it also in view to have an interview with Lambourne, by whom he every moment expected to be joined, without the presence of any witnesses. He knew the character of this man—prompt, bloody, resolute, and greedy, and judged him the most fit agent he could employ in his further designs. But ten miles of their journey had been measured ere he heard the hasty clatter of horse's hoofs behind him, and was overtaken by Michael Lambourne.

Fretted as he was with his absence, Varney received his profligate servant with a rebuke of unusual bitterness. "Drunken villain," he said, "thy idleness and debauched folly will stretch a halter ere it be long; and for me, I care not how soon!"

This style of objurgation, Lambourne, who was elated to an unusual degree, not only by an extraordinary cup of wine, but by the sort of confidential interview he had just had with the Earl, and the secret of which he had made himself master, did not receive with his wonted humility. "He would take no insolence of language," he said, "from the best knight that ever wore spurs. Lord Leicester had detained him on some business of import, and that was enough for Varney, who was but a servant like himself.”

Varney was not a little surprised at his unusual tone of insolence; but ascribing it to liquor, suffered it to pass as if unnoticed, and then began to tamper with Lambourne, touching his willingness to aid in removing out of the Earl of Leicester's way an obstacle to a rise, which would put it in his power to reward his trusty followers to their utmost wish. And upon Michael Lambourne's seeming ignorant what was meant, he plainly indicated “the litter-load, yonder,” as the impediment which he desired should be removed.

“Look you, Sir Richard, and so forth,” said Michael, “some are wiser than some, that is one thing, and some are worse than some, that's another. I know my lord's mind on this matter better than thou, for he hath trusted me fully in the matter. Here are his mandates, and his last words were, Michael Lambourne—for his lordship speaks to me as a gentleman of the sword, and useth not the words drunken villain, or such like phrase, of those who know not how to bear new dignities,—Varney, says he, must pay the utmost respect to my Countess—I trust to you for looking to it, Lambourne, says his lordship, and you must bring back my signet from him peremptorily.”

“Ay,” replied Varney, “said he so indeed? You know all, then?”

“All—all—and you were as wise to make a friend of me while the weather is fair betwixt us.”

“And was there no one present,” said Varney, “when my lord so spoke?”

“Not a breathing creature,” replied Lambourne. “Think you my lord would trust any one with such matters, save an approved man of action like myself?”

“Most true,” said Varney; and making a pause, he looked forward on the moonlight road. They were traversing a wide and open heath. The litter, being at least a mile before them, was both out of sight and hearing. He looked behind, and there was an expanse, lighted by the moonbeams, without one human being in sight. He resumed his speech to Lambourne: “And will you turn upon your master, who has introduced you to this career of court-like favour—whose apprentice you have been, Michael—who has taught you the depths and shallows of court intrigue?”

“Michael not me?” said Lambourne; “I have a name will brook a *master* before it as well as another; and as to the rest, if I have been an apprentice, my indenture is out, and I am resolute to set up for myself.”

"Take thy quittance first, thou fool!" said Varney; and with a pistol, which he had for some time held in his hand, shot Lambourne through the body.

The wretch fell from his horse, without a single groan; and Varney, dismounting, rifled his pockets, turning out the lining, that it might appear he had fallen by robbers. He secured the Earl's packet, which was his chief object, but he also took Lambourne's purse, containing some gold pieces, the relics of what his debauchery had left him, and, from a singular combination of feelings, carried it in his hand only the length of a small river, which crossed the road, into which he threw it as far as he could fling. Such are the strange remnants of conscience which remain after she seems totally subdued, that this cruel and remorseless man would have felt himself degraded had he pocketed the few pieces belonging to the wretch whom he had thus ruthlessly slain.

The murderer reloaded his pistol, after cleaning the lock and barrel from the appearance of late explosion, and rode calmly after the litter, satisfying himself that he had so adroitly removed a troublesome witness to many of his intrigues, and the bearer of mandates which he had no intentions to obey, and which, therefore, he was desirous it should be thought had never reached his hand.

The remainder of the journey was made with a degree of speed, which showed the little care they had for the health of the unhappy Countess. They paused only at places where all was under their command, and where the tale they were prepared to tell of the insane Lady Varney would have obtained ready credit, had she made an attempt to appeal to the compassion of the few persons admitted to see her. But Amy saw no chance of obtaining a hearing from any to whom she had an opportunity of addressing herself, and, besides, was too terrified for the presence of Varney, to violate the implied condition, under which she was to travel free from his company. The authority of Varney, often so used, during the Earl's private journeys to Cumnor, readily procured relays of horses where wanted, so that they approached Cumnor Place upon the night after they left Kenilworth.

At this period of the journey, Varney came up to the rear of the litter, as he had done before repeatedly during their progress, and asked, "What does she?"

"She sleeps," said Foster; "I would we were home—her strength is exhausted."

"Rest will restore her," answered Varney. "She shall soon sleep sound and long—we must consider how to lodge her in safety."

"In her own apartments, to be sure," said Foster. "I have sent Janet to her aunt's, with a proper rebuke, and the old women are truth itself—for they hate this lady cordially."

"We will not trust them, however, friend Anthony," said Varney; "we must secure her in that stronghold where you keep your gold."

"My gold!" said Anthony, much alarmed; "why, what gold have I?—God help me, I have no gold—I would I had."

"Now, marry hang thee, thou stupid brute—who thinks of or cares for thy gold?—If I did, could I not find an hundred better ways to come at it?—In one word, thy bed-chamber, which thou hast fenced so curiously, must be her place of seclusion; and thou, thou hind, shalt press her pillows of down.—I dare to say the Earl will never ask after the rich furniture of these four rooms."

This last consideration rendered Foster tractable; he only asked permission to ride before, to make matters ready, and spurring his horse, he posted before the litter, while Varney falling about threescore paces behind it, it remained only attended by Tider.

When they had arrived at Cumnor Place, the Countess asked eagerly for Janet, and showed much alarm when informed that she was no longer to have the attendance of that amiable girl.

"My daughter is dear to me, madam," said Foster, gruffly; "and I desire not that she should get the court-tricks of lying and 'scaping—somewhat too much of that has she learned already, an it please your ladyship."

The Countess, much fatigued and greatly terrified by the circumstances of her journey, made no answer to this insolence, but mildly expressed a wish to retire to her chamber.

"Ay, ay," muttered Foster, "'tis but reasonable; but, under favour, you go not to your gew-gaw toy-house yonder—you will sleep to-night in better security."

"I would it were in my grave," said the Countess; "but that mortal feelings shiver at the idea of soul and body parting."

"You, I guess, have no chance to shiver at that," replied Foster. "My lord comes hither to-morrow, and doubtless you will make your own ways good with him."

"But does he come hither?—does he indeed, good Foster?"

"Oh, ay, good Foster!" replied the [illegible]. "But what Foster shall I be to-morrow, when you speak of me to my lord—though all I have done was to obey his own orders?"

"You shall be my protector—a rough one indeed—but still a protector," answered the Countess. "Ah, that Janet were but here!"

"She is better where she is," answered Foster—"one of you is enough to perplex a plain head—but will you taste any refreshment?"

"Oh, no, no—my chamber—my chamber. I trust," she said, apprehensively, "I may secure it on the inside?"

"With all my heart," answered Foster, "so I may secure it on the outside"; and taking a light he led the way to a part of the building where Amy had never been, and conducted her up a stair of great height, preceded by one of the old women with a lamp. At the head of the stair, which seemed of almost immeasurable height, they crossed a short wooden gallery, formed of black oak, and very narrow, at the farther end of which was a strong oaken door, which opened and admitted them into the miser's apartment, homely in its accommodations in the very last degree, and, except in name, little different from a prison-room.

Foster stopped at the door, and gave the lamp to the Countess, without either offering or permitting the attendance of the old woman who had carried it. The lady stood not on ceremony, but taking it hastily, barred the door, and secured it with the ample means provided on the inside for that purpose.

Varney, meanwhile, had lurked behind on the stairs, but hearing the door barred, he now came up on tiptoe, and Foster, winking to him, pointed with self-complacence to a piece of concealed machinery in the wall, which, playing with much ease and little noise, dropped a part of the wooden gallery, after the manner of a drawbridge, so as to cut off all communication between the door of the bedroom, which he usually inhabited, and the landing-place of the high winding-stair which ascended to it. The rope by which this machinery was wrought was generally carried within the bed-chamber, it being Foster's object to provide against invasion from without; but now that it was intended to secure the prisoner within, the cord had been brought over to the landing-place, and was there made fast, when Foster, with much complacency, had dropped the unsuspected trap-door.

Varney looked with great attention at the machinery, and peeped more than once down the abyss which was opened by the fall of the trap-door. It was dark as pitch, and seemed profoundly deep, going, as Foster informed his confederate in a whisper, nigh to the lowest vault of the Castle. Varney cast once more a fixed and long look down into this sable gulf, and then followed Foster to the part of the manor-house most usually inhabited.

When they arrived in the parlour which we have mentioned, Varney requested Foster to get them supper, and some of the choicest wine. "I will seek Alasco," he added; "we have work for him to do, and we must put him in good heart."

Foster groaned at this intimation, but made no remonstrance. The old woman assured Varney that Alasco had scarce eaten or drunken since her master's departure, living perpetually shut up in the laboratory, and talking as if the world's continuance depended on what he was doing there.

"I will teach him that the world hath other claims on him," said Varney, seizing a light, and going in quest of the alchemist. He returned, after a considerable absence, very pale, but yet with his habitual sneer on his cheek and nostril—"Our friend," he said, "has exhaled."

"How! what mean you?" said Foster.—"Run away—fled with my forty pounds, that should have been multiplied a thousand fold? I will have Hue and Cry!"

"I will tell thee a surer way," said Varney.

"How! which way?" exclaimed Foster; "I will have back my forty pounds—I deemed them as surely a thousand times multiplied—I will have back my in-put, at the least."

"Go hang thyself, then, and sue Alasco in the devil's Court of Chancery, for thither he has carried the cause."

"How! What dost thou mean—is he dead?"

"Ay, truly is he," said Varney, "and properly swoln already in the face and body. He had been mixing some of his devil's medicines, and the glass mask which he used constantly had fallen from his face, so that the subtle poison entered the brain, and did its work."

"*Sancta Maria!*" said Foster; "I mean, God in his mercy preserve us from covetousness and deadly sin! Had he not had projection, think you? Saw you no ingots in the crucibles?"

"Nay, I looked not but at the dead carrion," answered Varney; "an ugly spectacle—he was swoln like a corpse three days exposed on the wheel. But to our graver matter. I will teach thee a springe, Tony, to catch a pewit—yonder trap-door—yonder gimcrack of thine, will remain secure in appearance, will it not, though the supports are withdrawn beneath?"

"Ay, marry, will it," said Foster; "so long as it is not trodden on."

"But were the lady to attempt an escape over it," replied Varney, "her weight would carry it down?"

"A mouse's weight would do it," said Foster.

"Why, then, she dies in attempting her escape, and what could you or I help it, honest Tony? Let us to bed, we will adjust our project to-morrow."

On the next day, when evening approached, Varney summoned Foster to the execution of their plan. Tider and Foster's old man-servant were sent on a feigned errand down to the village, and Anthony himself, as if anxious to see that the Countess suffered no want of accommodation, visited her place of confinement. He was so much staggered at the mildness and patience with which she seemed to endure her confinement, that he could not help earnestly recommending to her not to cross the threshold of her room on any account whatever, until Lord Leicester should come. "Which," he added, "I trust in God, will be very soon." Amy patiently promised that she would resign herself to her fate, and Foster returned to his hardened companion with his conscience half-eased of the perilous load that weighed on it. "I have warned her," he said; "surely in vain is the snare set in sight of any bird!"

He left, therefore, the Countess's door unsecured on the outside, and, under the eye of Varney, withdrew the supports which sustained the falling trap, which, therefore, kept its level position merely by a slight adhesion. They withdrew to wait the issue on the ground-floor adjoining, but they waited long in vain. At length Varney, after walking long to and fro, with his face muffled in his cloak, threw it suddenly back and exclaimed, "Surely never was a woman fool enough to neglect so fair an opportunity of escape!"

"Perhaps she is resolved," said Foster, "to await her husband's return."

"True!—most true," said Varney, rushing out, "I had not thought of that before."

In less than two minutes, Foster, who remained behind, heard the tread of a horse in the courtyard, and then a whistle similar to that which was the Earl's usual signal; the instant after, the door of the Countess's chamber opened, and in the same moment the trap-door gave way. There was a rushing sound—a heavy fall—a faint groan—and all was over.

At the same instant Varney called in at the window, in an accent and tone which was an indescribable mixture betwixt horror and raillery, "Is the bird caught?—is the deed done?"

"Oh, God forgive us!" replied Anthony Foster.

"Why, thou fool," said Varney, "thy toil is ended, and thy reward secure. Look down into the vault—what seest thou?"

"I see only a heap of white clothes, like a snow-drift," said Foster. "O God, she moves her arm!"

"Hurl something down on her—thy gold chest, Tony—it is an heavy one."

"Varney, thou art an incarnate fiend!" replied Foster; "there needs nothing more—she is gone!"

"So pass our troubles," said Varney, entering the room; "I dreamed not I could have mimicked the Earl's call so well."

"Oh, if there be judgment in Heaven, thou hast deserved it," said Foster, "and wilt meet it! Thou hast destroyed her by means of her best affections. It is a seething of the kid in the mother's milk!"

"Thou art a fanatical ass," replied Varney; "let us now think how the alarm should be given—the body is to remain where it is."

But their wickedness was to be permitted no longer; for even while they were at this consultation, Tressilian and Raleigh broke in upon them, having obtained admittance by means of Tider and Foster's servant, whom they had secured at the village.

Anthony Foster fled on their entrance; and knowing each corner and pass of the intricate old house, escaped all search. But Varney was taken on the spot; and, instead of expressing compunction for what he had done, seemed to take a fiendish pleasure in pointing out to them the remains of the murdered Countess, while at the same time he defied them to show that he had any share in her death. The despairing grief of Tressilian, on viewing the mangled and yet warm remains of what had lately been so lovely and so beloved, was such, that Raleigh was compelled to have him removed from the place by force, while he himself assumed the direction of what was to be done.

Varney, upon a second examination, made very little mystery either of the crime or of its motives; alleging, as a reason for his frankness, that though much of what he confessed could only have attached to him by suspicion, yet such suspicion would have been sufficient to deprive him of Leicester's confidence, and to destroy all his towering plans of ambition. "I was not born," he said, "to drag on the remainder of life a degraded outcast—nor will I so die, that my fate shall make a holiday to the vulgar herd."

From these words it was apprehended he had some design upon himself, and he was carefully deprived of all means by which such could be carried into execution. But like some of the heroes of antiquity, he carried about his person a small quantity of strong poison, prepared probably by the celebrated Demetrius Alasco. Having swallowed this potion over-night, he was found next morning dead in his cell; nor did he appear [illegible] have suffered much agony, his countenance presenting, even in death, the habitual expression of sneering sarcasm, which was predominant while he lived. "The wicked man," saith Scripture, "hath no bands in his death."

The fate of his colleague in wickedness was long unknown. Cumnor Place was deserted immediately after the murder; for, in the vicinity of what was called the Lady Dudley's Chamber, the domestics pretended to hear groans, and screams, and other supernatural noises. After a certain length of time, Janet, hearing no tidings of her father, became the uncontrolled mistress of his property, and conferred it with her hand, upon Wayland, now a man of settled character, and holding a place in Elizabeth's household. But it was after they had been both dead for some years, that their eldest son and heir, in making some researches about Cumnor Hall, discovered a secret passage, closed by an iron door, which, opening from behind the bed in the Lady Dudley's Chamber, descended to a sort of cell, in which they found an iron chest containing a quantity of gold, and a human skeleton stretched above it. The fate of Anthony Foster was now manifest. He had fled to this place of concealment, forgetting the key of the spring-lock; and, being barred from escape, by the means he had used for preservation of that gold for which he had sold his salvation, he had there perished miserably. Unquestionably the groans and screams heard by the domestics were not entirely imaginary, but were those of this wretch, who, in his agony, was crying for relief and succour.

The news of the Countess's dreadful fate put a sudden period to the pleasures of Kenilworth. Leicester retired from court, and for a considerable time abandoned himself to his remorse. But as Varney in his last declaration had been studious to spare the character of his patron, the Earl was the object rather of compassion than resentment. The Queen at length recalled him to court; he was once more distinguished as a statesman and favourite, and the rest of his career is well known to history. But there was something retributive in his death, if, according to an account very generally received, it took place from his swallowing a draught of poison which was designed by him for another person.

Sir Hugh Robsart died very soon after his daughter, having settled his estate on Tressilian. But neither the prospect of rural independence, nor the promises of favour which Elizabeth held out to induce him to follow the court, could remove his profound melancholy.[3] Wherever he went, he seemed to see before him the disfigured corpse of the early and only object of his affection. At length, having made provision for the maintenance of the old friends and old servants who formed Sir Hugh's family at Lidcote Hall, he himself embarked with his friend Raleigh for the Virginia expedition, and, young in years but old in grief, died before his day in that foreign land.

Of inferior persons it is only necessary to say, that Blount, as a brave commander in the wars, was much more in his element than during the short period of his following the court; and that Flibbertigibbet's acute genius raised him to favour and distinction, in the employment both of Burleigh and Cecil.

THE END